

2010 River of Words Michigan Poetry Finalists

Learning to Be Seven Years Old

The evening settles into
the calls of loons as they echo
over Lake Cadillac. I'm with
my grandparents and they
are growing older. No matter
how they try to smooth
their skin into youth, each night
it is the same wise wrinkles
that look back at me in the
dying light.

Tomorrow,
we'll travel across the lake
to the playground that my brother
and I have been eyeing all day.
My grandfather, with his skin
darkened by the sun, and his familiar
soft accent, will fold
me into the smell of peppermint
and tobacco in his arms,
putting his hands around mine
so that I can steer the boat,
and my grandmother
will sew herself into a new dress,
watching us swing and jump
from slide to monkey bars, smiling
at our small laughter.
The air will thicken as it grows
dark. This evening
will cost my grandparents
a thousand heartbeats that
cannot be avoided,
but the sunset is beautiful,
and it paints their faces young.

*Patricia Schlutt, age 15
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Northview Public School
Teacher: Rodney Torresson
2010 River of Words Finalist*

Driving Back Into My Childhood in the Car We Used to Drive over Roller Coaster Road

On our way to fish again

I watch the seven years that have passed fly through the trees
as we weave through the backroads to the Rogue River.
Every dripping leaf bends the light toward our eyes,
every evening bird trilling a song through the air
like the sound of the water, the river
that rushes toward Lake Michigan in a hurry to grow older.
I will bide my time.

Here, in the stillness
of an evening that cannot be prevented,
there is a sadness blooming among the poison oak and violets below my feet
that is not crushed when I step on it,
by grows up into my bloodstream, wrapping itself around the veins
that keep me aging,
the veins that keep me tethered to fevers and thin breath.

*Patricia Schlutt, age 15
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Northview High School
Teacher: Rodney Torreson
2010 River of Words Finalist*

Two Thousand Years after the First Canoes Broke the Surface

While rowing with the crew team
each day after final bell had rung,
I discovered the greatest passing of time
that anyone had known.
Each afternoon, the Chippewa River
pulled our boats farther

away from the docks, and me with them,
the water teaching us each breath
anew. When it rained
and the sky fell to pieces in the water,
I watched the reflection of the shore,
the way the trees bent
when fractured by raindrops.

One time I fell asleep
in the boathouse attic.
Among the broken equipment and blankets,
I dreamt that,
as I helped carry a boat to the dock,
my arm caught on the metal edge
and my skin split open.
Out of the cut came
not blood
but Chippewa riverwater
glistening in the sunlight.

Patricia Schlutt, age 15
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Northview High School
Teacher: Rodney Torreson
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Mission Creek, Montana

A river, sunk deep into the prairie
remembers the time I fished in it with my father
in a deep Montana evening. Fish
swam by in their race towards autumn,
but neither of us felt the need to chase them.
There were arrowheads that had been lying
in the tall grasses, a hundred years of waiting
to greet our fingers with their unsure edges,
broken backs.

The night broke over our shoulders,
mine young and his quickly aging, so we

returned to the car and left only
the river there to remember the solitary evening
when Montana had become more than a place,
but a sacred breath to take
when you were out of things to say,
when you were out of things to sanctify.

*Patricia Schlutt, age 15
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Northview High School
Teacher: Rodney Torreson
2010 River of Words Finalist*

The Cemetery Across the Road Has Been Filling with Fireflies

They land on gravestones and gather in trees
to blink at us through the rain.
Once I knew the language of fireflies.
I knew how to tell if one was male or female,
and whether one was hungry.
That's long worn from my mind,
but tonight there is no mystery about what they say.

The dead are not gone. Here, on the front porch
we watch the souls we thought far away
all wrapped up in delicate tiny wings
and lights. We watch them telling us
about the beauty of the oncoming dusk,
how not to fear aging. One crosses
the distance between us
and lands on my cheek, ancient wings beating.

*Patricia Schlutt, age 15
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Northview High School
Teacher: Rodney Torreson
2010 River of Words Finalist*

Springtime (Haiku)

Flowers are blooming
the bumblebees are zooming
in spring my heart grows.

Anneliese Ferguson, age 6
Traverse City, Michigan
The Children's House
Teacher: Nadine Elmgren
2010 River of Words Finalist

Desperation River

This lonely river
Trails our city's rise and fall
Our litter and ruins
Are its desperation call
We all have eyes
To see what we've done
We can pick up the pieces
If we admit to what we've become.

Bailey Lehmkuhle, age 13
Flint, Michigan
St. John Vianney School
Teacher: Elizabeth Petrides
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