

## OREGON POETS EXPLORE RIVERS

By Mike Shuler

As I browsed the Oregon Poetry Collection in the State Library, I was attracted to a 2012 anthology titled *What the River Brings*, edited by Kathryn Ridall. It drew me because of my own affinity for rivers, sprung from wading and fishing in them, prospecting in and around them, and living by them.

I read this book as one would fish or hike a river, moving from one poem to another at a pace determined by the river. Some were like rapids rushing over boulders, others slow and languid, deep and debris-filled. Some were difficult to approach, but with bright flashes of insight making the foray worthwhile. Others offered meditations on cycles and change, places to contemplate before moving on.

In “Up in The Mountains,” Barbara Drake speaks of rivers starting small, like “little pets,” at their headwaters: “I saw the Breitenbush river where it poured / no larger than the downspout / of my own house. The Clackamas/ was a ribbon of clear water I could step across.” Then she offers a note of caution, reminding us that at the end of its course, the river that emerged as a tame infant may have become a “deep and dangerous giant.” Likewise, Joseph Federico, in “River Rules,” notes that in winter the “raging North Umpqua” is “disdainful of past restraints” and “little concerned with standstill humans.”

William Stafford, in “Cottonwood,” explores the river “...upstream where tracks of raccoon, possum and waterbirds / form a design to be read.” The smell of cottonwood permeates the river and subsequently takes on sacred qualities for the poet, as it evokes the historical consequences of westward expansion in America. Like the wild visitors to the river, the poet leaves “a design to be read” by those who come after.

In “Before Nightfall,” Carter McKenzie notes that at twilight, darkening woods can be “any woods.” On a path to the river near Lost Creek, the poet is transported in memory back to “the Blue Ridge Mountains, / the barn where Black Beauty slept...and the deer made their way to feed off the garden / of my grandmother’s early mornings.” As the writer continues on the path through memory and reality, “the sky deepens,” and she moves “among trees I do and do not recognize.”

In “Above the Klickitat,” Don Colburn connects the experience of a friend to the course of a river: “On a treadmill early Friday at the gym / a friend went down. . . . Word is, he can move his toes and talk/ but thinks it’s 1994, thinks / he’s running late, but can’t say for what.” Seeking understanding, the poet returns to the metaphorical river, and concludes that water “. . . can’t go back uphill / but finds the best way down.”

The 56 Oregon poets in this volume interpret the language of rivers from differing perspectives. In “Fugitive Memory,” Penelope Scambly Schott calls it “an old language nobody speaks,” which evokes memories “from so far back, I can never cross over.” In “The Mirror of this Landscape,” Eleanor Berry sees “in the tumult around / the cloudy country of mental life, / no clear demarcations, no definite steps / in its descents.” In “The Language of Rivers,” Jenny Root moves to a city but discovers that people there also understand “the language of swirl and tide, delta / and waterfall.”