



SHADOW SELFIES BY JIM EARL

foot overnight?” We were standing at that very spot. No wonder the river called me stupid.

Russian poet Arseny Tarkovsky writes:

*He kicked off his boots and put
his feet into the water; and the water
began talking to him, not knowing
that he didn't know its language.*

Oregon poet William Stafford writes, probably of the Willamette, “What the river says, that is what I say.” My favorite lines about rivers, though, are by T.S. Eliot:

*I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god — sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyer of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost
forgotten*

*By the dwellers in cities — ever, however, implacable,
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshipers of the machine, but waiting, watching
and waiting.*

*His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.
The river is within us.*

Riverbank Park

In my year of walking I learned a lot about the park. It was inaugurated 100 years ago, in July 1914, with music, dancing, swimming and fireworks. Eugene was recovering from typhoid and sorely needed what the new park offered: peaceful, therapeutic trails and vistas on the butte and along the river below. It was an Olmsted-ian “pleasure ground” for hikers, swimmers, campers, bicyclists — but especially in 1914 for walkers like me, who used the park as Olmsted imagined, for “the proper exercise of the intellectual and moral forces.”

Fifty-five years later Valley River Center paved over a big stretch of the north bank; Eugene, shocked, responded with plans to save the rest. The riverbanks had served as landfills, junkyards and garbage dumps for decades. Gradually the city stitched together Skinner Butte, the Rose Garden, the Maury Jacobs and West Bank Parks, Delta Ponds, Alton Baker Park and the Whilamut Natural Area; and now, the Ruth Bascom Riverbank Trail System is finally complete enough to be experienced as one big park, half-recreational, half-natural areas. Last year it was named

one of the 10 best city bike trails in America by Bicycling.com, and I vote it a great walking park, too. There are miles of beautiful maintained footpaths unknown to bicyclists.

Still, it’s not really a park, it’s a “system.” Much of it is under city of Eugene Parks and Open Space, but much is under a crazy quilt of other agencies. I hope someday it becomes one big official park. In the meantime, the city’s planning a centenary celebration for this summer.

It’s well worth celebrating. If on a summer day you raft the 6 miles down the Willamette through Eugene, you’d hardly know you’re in the middle of a city of 170,000 people. Once upon a time, not that long ago, the river flowed through cottonwood forests 2 miles wide; today just two thin lines of these our tallest indigenous trees survive along its banks, beautiful and graceful, towering over less majestic oaks and firs, a natural signature for Eugene. In summer they look like a forest; in winter when they’re naked, you see how few remain. I hope they never disappear.

Nature

What else have I learned in my meditative walks along the riverbank? Hard to say because when I walk I try not to think. That’s what meditation is, not thinking. My best hours on the riverbank aren’t spent with words, but looking and listening. One day I was back on that long, flat rock with my feet in the water when my cell phone rang. My daughter, far away, was unhappy; could I help? I told her to go down to the creek and put her feet in the water. She did, and the therapy worked. Her friends declared me a wise dad, but it was only the river speaking.

Wordsworth, who grew up by a river, describes the effect of its voice:

*Didst thou beauteous Stream
Make ceaseless music through the night and day,
Which with its steady cadence tempering
Our human waywardness, composed my thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me,
Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,
A knowledge, a dim earnest of the calm
Which Nature breathes among the fields and groves?*

Much of the time words can’t be helped, at least not in my case. Sometimes the river flows with words, composing my thoughts, mostly about Nature and Beauty. On the subject of Nature, my year in the park led me to four conclusions. They’re not new ideas, it’s just that I just finally “got” them.

1. Unlike the human world, Nature has no thoughts, intentions or desires; it just is.

2. By definition, therefore, it’s perfect.

3. We may love Nature, but it doesn’t love us back.

4. The love you feel for it anyway makes it beautiful.

That the world doesn’t love us, but just *is*, is a hard lesson; but sometimes when you’re happy enough to love it anyway, simply because you’re alive, it seems to light up and becomes beautiful. Do we love it because it’s beautiful, or is it beautiful because we love it? What’s the difference? It’s an illusion that Nature loves us, but *feeling that it does* has a therapeutic effect, at least on me.

Beauty

There’s a term for the kind of beauty one finds in a park: the *picturesque*. It was invented in England in the 18th century as a technique for landscape painting but quickly became a theory of landscape design itself. Perhaps it’s superficial, sentimental, aristocratic, but if you take your easel to the park, you’ll probably put it where the picturesque tradition leads you. Same with a camera: You look for a certain kind of light and shadow, contrast, things in groups and alone, mood, texture, a diagonal, a focal point (not too close to the center) — painters and photographers have ideas about “composition,” what makes a picture beautiful. City parks make it easy, because they’re intentionally picturesque.

Landscape professionals think of the picturesque as a middle category between the beautiful and the sublime. A leaf, a flower, a tree can be beautiful but not picturesque; wilderness, mountains and vistas can be sublime — overwhelming — but not in city parks. In our park, vistas from the five bridges do offer hints of the sublime, though, so I look for pictures in all three categories. The pictures now cover a year. The only story in them is the turning of the seasons. That day when my feet hurt, and I slowed down, and fell in love with the park, and everything became beautiful — a mythical moment — I started taking pictures of everything — trees, grasses, rocks, water, birds, graffiti, reflections, shadows. Later, when I came to understand the park better, I learned to see it better. When February came around again, I knew to focus this time on that thin line of naked cottonwoods, bathed in a pastel late-afternoon light. Suddenly they had something to say about age, endurance, dignity.

Well, that’s my therapy. I’m not sure what drove me to it, but I know what I found. The ancients believed that beauty’s the presence of a goddess in something. For me, each photo records a moment when the goddess touched something, and it brightened; which is to say, I fell in love with a little piece of Nature in the park. ■