

Masthead Logo

**The Iowa Review**

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Volume 15  
Issue 3 *Fall*

Article 30

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1985

## River Time

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### Recommended Citation

Holden, Jonathan. "River Time." *The Iowa Review* 15.3 (1985): 116-121. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3275>

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## Two Poems · *Jonathan Holden*

### RIVER TIME

Day after day we fell deeper  
in love with gravity. Mornings  
we could hardly wait to catch up  
with the water. In tandem, making  
aluminum shout over gravel, shush  
up in the sand, I and my taciturn  
friend from Minnesota would drive  
our canoe down the bank at the river,  
steady the boat for Tom's small son,  
scramble in ourselves and then surrender.  
"River time" we called it for a couple  
of days, until we forgot the old time,  
river time became absolute time,  
the current our clock. We had struck  
some common, rock-bottom pace.  
We were drifting in step  
with each floating leaf, with every  
unblinking blister of foam  
under the channel's silent spell,  
no need to paddle  
except to adjust to the ticking  
current, trowel a slow whirlpool, a furl  
filling up in the ripples we trailed,  
correcting our timing to keep  
in perfect stride with the law.

A dozen canoes, one canoe to a bend,  
moving with the caravans of moving fog.  
By noon everyone would be stoned  
on pot and the hundreds of pounds  
of beer we had brought.  
The architect and his wife, all  
the assistant professors, the various

students, even my friend in the stern  
would be rendered inert,  
complacent, unwilling to speak.  
Whatever it was we might need  
we would let the river decide.  
We'd unbuttoned ourselves from our words,  
we'd jettisoned the ballast  
of the usual week, left all that  
upstream on the bank. It made us  
pleased with ourselves, day  
after day, simply to register  
the faithful way those banks continued  
unfolding themselves and tree followed tree  
through the warm, intermittent rain.  
The rain meddled in everything.  
It riveted the tarnished water, shooting  
plump bolts through and through it,  
spot-welding reflections of the sky.  
The rain hopped all over your tarp  
and in the hot swarm of your hair.  
It was on your tongue, in your joints,  
in the steam of your breath,  
until you forgot to shoo off  
the drops that alit, forgot  
the wet yoke sticking tight to your back,  
the hot swamps you lugged around  
in both boots, forgot even the mush  
squeezing foam between your toes.

Long before our last night on the river  
we were wet beyond hope,  
we could get no wetter. That night  
someone's flashlight beam nicked  
a flat rock with a necklace  
curled on it—soft, precious—  
a copperhead blocking the path.  
In a hutch of clear plastic  
anchored by rocks, we skinned

and steamed together. Outside, a bonfire  
shooting twice as high as a man  
gave its fierce work to an armload  
of stones, coaxing them into embers.  
We took turns steering to the tent  
between tongs each red-hot rock  
and scattered water on it,  
making steam snarl, blinding  
ourselves with blast upon blast.  
Naked, whooping, we'd charge  
at the river, then crawl back  
in the blur of that stifling incubator  
where we were babies again,  
the language was skin,  
you could forget even your name.  
Of the girl who stole with me later  
back to my tent I remember only  
that she was wet wherever I parted her,  
alluvial, how the graceful curved way  
her hair fell seemed like a word  
I had learned once—anonymous,  
familiar. She was all words at once.  
And I remember how, halfway  
toward dawn, the cries of two  
whippoorwills kept opening  
and closing like twin arteries  
while we answered each other.

Next morning, our last, the river  
was iron, frying, leaping  
in the light rain as people numbly  
traded partners. I carried  
my pack to the girl's canoe  
and we took the current's smooth  
old hand, let it take our hand,  
our boat rhymed with the river,  
and the drizzle lifted, the complexion  
of the water cleared,

and we could see in the interior  
the dark, slow, slippage of bass.  
Oars shipped, we watched a moccasin  
give us the slip, scribble away  
deep in that gray-green psalm.  
And far out through the brush  
and the mist's restlessness  
a bobwhite swiped its whetstone.  
We just let the boat drift,  
pleased with the lull of inertia,  
foreseeing no end, ready  
for only what could be more water,  
knowing that around the coming bend  
across another misty clearing  
the profile of the trees would be  
unbroken, curving into the next  
bend where another old tree  
would be succumbing, tempted  
to drink, its crooked reach  
combed by the water, waking  
the current under the cut-bank  
before the water would widen  
and we'd stall  
in an even purer silence,  
dim canyons of boulders, of twilight  
deep in the green requiem below  
easing silently under our bow,  
the river adagio.

That afternoon, reluctant, we beheld  
through gray, scarcely seeping air  
stumps of a broken bridge  
and down both banks a dump,  
a great population of junked cars—  
bodies which, once pushed, went churning  
headfirst and, catching  
on roots, had flipped on their backs  
with the rest of the rusty scree—

a scorched city lost under the trees—  
until the next bend gathered us  
in, a crowd of people came slowly  
around, walking on the rocks  
where two trucks were parked  
and a road—a shock of sky in the trees—  
petered into the floodplain stones  
and at the shallows stopped.  
And two men, two fat retarded twins  
in bib-overalls, two comical men,  
humpty-dumpties with rotted mouths  
were circling my Minnesota friend,  
spitting words, gesticulating at him,  
arguing he better move his goddamn  
hippie van because this floodplain  
here belonged to *them*, while Tom,  
from his cab, glared down with a stiff  
slightly puzzled stare, white-knuckled  
in the face. And the look the architect  
slipped me meant something dirty  
he knew about, it meant *Move off*.  
We walked our canoe across the ford,  
shoved it up on mud. The rain  
returned, through the rain  
we watched one brother squat  
behind Tom's camper to jot the plate.  
Tom's truck wallowed, bucking in reverse  
like a dog digging, spewing back rocks.  
But the fat guy expected it. He lurched  
the gap to his pickup's cab,  
and the long .22 automatic he pulled  
discharged its six dried-twig snaps  
at the back where Tom's boy bounced  
as the rear of the fleeing camper  
leapt over the crest and out of sight.

In fistfights the hate-scent can be so strong  
it gets the tightening circle half incensed.  
But anger, in a shot, goes so abstract  
at first you can't even recognize it.  
Just this detached small-kindling spark.  
Could it be some practical joke  
over which both brothers on the opposite bank  
now chortled and whooped like Laurel and Hardy,  
they were slapping their knees, congratulating  
each other with whops on the back? *What time  
was it?* All I knew was how wet and cold  
and pathetic we looked, searching  
for footholds in the mud, slipping,  
digging in our heels again and heaving  
our canoes up the bank—  
how sick of this desolate river and the rain.  
At last the road like a room in the woods.  
Token of a hug was brusque enough good-bye  
to the girl, who wanted to get away  
as much as I did. And I talked  
with the architect of what we'd seen,  
our words—the words we needed—seeping  
slowly back like heat into our extremities.  
Then the small chagrin of comfort—  
dry socks like Christmas presents,  
the reassuring idle of a car—  
our words now flooding back luxuriously,  
words for that godforsaken place  
and how to get out of it.  
Later, with time enough to bathe,  
the words for our excuses, the redundancies,  
the first, sweet, foreshadowing  
of shame.