

Wrack Line

“All I learned is what I love.” Roethke (Saginaw, MI poet)

1.

If you go down to walk
beside the Grand River, do you
see it?

What’s cast up, branches, twigs, a 2x4,
a plastic length of dental floss,
a wedge of styrofoam, a shell or two—
here’s what high water left:
all in a straight line, not ruler straight but
arranged, piled
ephemeral art from high water.

How water casts out what it can’t use, as though to say, “You
take this!” Your wish: for other things to be cast
out, the chemicals dumped, waste-water
from fields and lawns, run-off phosphates, PFAS, oils and grease
harmful to living things.
“Here, take this!”

2.

Everywhere it laps in, touches land, the lake-
water makes wetlands, especially waters blown by wind,
steady easterlies, the shore soaked, low spots

in soft ground where deer step, make trails, and every spring
warblers fly in, find a marsh, early May, without fail,
groups of birds, tired, sometimes in a flock so large

they show up on radar. Imagine all these, drawn
by water, and juneberry, dogwood budding out when
insects hatch, in sequence. Later, Joe Pye weed

waves its large flat clusters, spotted stems,
food for butterflies, hummingbirds. Nearby, milkweed
that will leave its gray pods clacking in wind.

3.

The imp of the divine lives along the river,
democratic, among the tumbled chunks
of concrete, trees broken in half by last year's
storm, the asphalt path made smooth so the blind

can walk there and veterans from the Home
nearby. Why do you linger? To watch
the lovers bend to kiss, to see how wind
frets the water, to idle away an hour or two.

4.

Along the Rogue a company hires it into shoes. waiting, turning, Beamhouse and stage. How did Before rules object, or quit? "I don't think into the river.	River in workers to It's a business draining, drying, tanyard, first it work? Wooden on the environment. One man slams we should pour It stinks."	Rockford, Michigan tan leather, shaping of vats and liquid, soaking, taking time. stage, second vats, trenches. Did workers ever his hat down. this stuff
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5.

Changed its name in the 1950s from Wolverine to Wolverine Worldwide,
to show its scope.

Made by 3M in 1952: Scotchgard. To coat and repel water and dirt.

Debuted in 1958: their famous Hush Puppies and soon 1 in 10 adults
claimed to have a pair.

They warned Wolverine Worldwide, in 1999, that the coating had dangers.

Still, the dumping went on, scraps of leather and discarded soles thrown as "fill" along
House Street, along Rum Creek.

Wolverine said they didn't know, didn't know: vinyl chloride,
trichloroethylene, mercury, chromium, and lead.

One of the attorneys asked, "Would you live downriver, allow your kids
to play in or drink that water? What if your house relied on a well?"

6.

Environmental news:

- The number of birds in the United States and Canada has declined by 3 billion, or 29 percent, over the past half-century, scientists find. (*The New York Times*, September 19, 2019). “The skies are emptying.”
- June 2019 was hottest on record for the globe. Antarctic sea ice coverage shrank to new record low. (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration July 28, 2019).
- Under the topsoil at the 15-acre site where Wolverine World Wide spent a hundred years using vast amounts of chemicals to convert animal hides into leather, high levels of volatile contaminants like vinyl chloride and trichloroethylene can be found. Toxic metals like mercury, chromium and lead are confirmed at high levels in the groundwater and sediment in the adjacent Rogue River, including at the spot where people regularly launch canoes and kayaks alongside the heavily-used White Pine Trail. (*Mlive Michigan* March 25, 2019).

7.

You never had a chance
to speak, pressed under and down
by weight of water.

8.

Because living near the airport runway’s end,
they got used to the racket of jet engines,
because the planes came in low, flaps down,
because they were travelers, to the East, to Europe,
because they liked imagining the passengers,
belted in, leaning back with closed eyes,
because they too dreamed of Paris, New York, Rome,
because one morning Nancy E. went out walking Bella
and found cream-colored slime along the creek,
because de-icing the silver birds in winter was needed,
because propylene glycol starts off pink,
because airport officials said they had reduced
the number of gallons from 80,000 gallons to 6,000,
because it was organic de-icing liquid,
because the amphibians had birth defects,
because the peepers didn’t start up in spring,
because no amount of runoff was safe, because,
think: would you pour this into water?

9.

Off the main path, I veer off asphalt
and walk closer to the river,

avoiding dogs with my dog.

It looks arranged by an artist
of the ephemeral, perhaps Andy Goldsworthy—

sticks, twigs, branches, leaves, eel grass.

A six-inch wide heap of what's been
cast up by high water, coughed out.

Not accidental, thus here to speak to me.

Up above in trees, still bare, red-winged
blackbirds make their cries—*first, here.*

Mate-seeking, nest building, harbingers.

We kick along, the black and white dog all nose,
ecstatic, nostrils and muzzle flaring, vibrating.

Her sensory attention astonishes me--

as I count lockdown months, lament,
worry, fret—finally yielding to what I see,

admire—nature insistently pointing to spring.
The warblers back, and singing, right on schedule,

and Baltimore orioles, high in the canopy, their melodic
songs, yes, here, here, not going anywhere,

and back, swaying in the high branches, leaves
about to unfurl.

~Patricia Clark