



MY HEART BENDS TOWARD A RIVER by Dorinda G. Dallmeyer

*Attapulgus*  
*Auchumpkee*  
*Cooleewahee*  
*Kinchafoonee*  
*Tobesofkee*

What a blessing it is to be here in Georgia, in a place where the names of our rivers, like our island setting today, add piquancy to our lives. As they roll on our tongues, these names make found poetry even if you know nothing about their meaning.

*Nacoochee*  
*Alapaha*  
*Ichaway-Notcharway*  
*Nottely*  
*Connesena*  
*Echeconnee*

And knowing the translation, you can make a poem of joy and longing. Take the following:

*Ocmulgee*  
*Euharlee*  
*Amicalola*  
*Muckalee*

It means....

*Up from the bubbling waters*

*She laughs as she rises.*

*Tumbling waters,*

*Pour on me.*

Even beyond its name, a river connects generations across time. My relationship to Georgia's rivers formed during my childhood in Macon, on the banks of one particular river, the Ocmulgee. That's my theme for today, that my heart bends toward a river, a river serving as a role model by which you judge every other river you cross in life.

The sources for the Ocmulgee range from an inauspicious sewer outfall in Atlanta to a relatively pristine Piedmont stream. Development at its headwaters has tried to pave it over, poison it, channelize it, suck it dry, and yet the Ocmulgee gathers strength downstream and prevails.

Eight generations of my family have lived in the Ocmulgee watershed, and I know the Ocmulgee best at the Fall Line city of Macon, situated at the feather edge of the Coastal Plain. My grandfather, a brick mason, helped construct abutments for a railroad bridge that still spans the river. My father ensured that I knew Macon was built of bricks because of the superb clay deposited in the floodplain and that the big cotton mills were there because of the Fall Line -- the energy the Ocmulgee offers for free as it tumbles from the Piedmont to arc lazily across the coastal plain to the sea. My father made sure I knew that the first encounter in Georgia between white Europeans and Indians took place on the Ocmulgee, when DeSoto crossed the river near the town now known as Westlake. And the first recorded barbecue in Georgia (fortunately, not of either the Indians or the Spaniards) took place there that same day.

As a child, I understood that the water which seeped from the cutbank up the hill from our house -- the water that the children in the neighborhood never tired of attempting to dam up in the ditch -- would inexorably make its way on down beside the road and under the highway, to join other anonymous streamlets and form Walnut Creek, and then flow to the Ocmulgee. The Ocmulgee snaked beyond Macon to the southeast, paralleling and sometimes crossing our path as we drove to Florida for vacation. Driving at night to cheat the summer heat, at Lumber City we always made a point to mark our passage over the Ocmulgee bridge. We would call out and wave good-bye to the river down there somewhere in the dark, the last bridge before it merged with the Oconee and their identities mingled in the Altamaha.

Not some shaded mountain stream, the Ocmulgee in Macon was plainly on view in its wide bed. It formed the natural boundary for the town when it was founded in the 1820s. What I knew as Riverside Drive originally was called Wharf Street. But when I was growing up, the only suggestion that this street once had been the head of navigation for steamboats plying the river was the presence of a fried-fish take-out restaurant shaped like a shrimp-boat. How

difficult it was to imagine the Ocmulgee as a commercial waterway. It seemed too small and too shallow to be worth fooling with. I had once stood on a bluff south of Macon, overlooking the floodplain, and to me the Ocmulgee bottomlands seemed to stretch to the horizon as wild and unknowable as the Amazon jungle.

The only counter to this notion of impenetrability was the Macon Motor Boat Club. During Fourth of July week, a flotilla would set off from the landing at the Spring Street bridge to go all the way down the Ocmulgee and then the Altamaha, too -- all the way to the Atlantic. In my imagination I saw them threading their way around sandbars crowded with alligators grinning in the sunshine -- alligators and sandbars at every turn. I have never been more covetous of making a trip than that one.

The river drew people from all over Macon, including William Holt Ernest, otherwise known as The Water Marvel. Mr. Ernest seemed ordinary enough: a workingman, a father, a member of the Baptist church. What distinguished him from everyone else was his ability to float for hours and his willingness to do so in public. Widely recognized in the community for his singular gift, Mr. Ernest once proposed to leap from the bridge into the Ocmulgee for a thousand dollars, just to prove that he would be saved by the skill he said he could teach to anyone. Since gambling was a sin for a Baptist, he also promised that the money would go to charity. But when the day arrived, he found the crowd assembled at the bridge had only been able to scabble together three dollars and he refused to go through with the stunt. Evidently it was the last time he offered to perform for money. Instead, this gaunt, grey-haired prophet of flotation would arrive unannounced, change into his dark bathing trunks, and swim out into deep water where he became The Water Marvel. Lying there as buoyant as a water strider, he seemed suspended between water and sky, eyes closed, meditative. After hours of drifting, he'd swim back in and towel off, chatting amiably with onlookers, just another man enjoying the water. Where his talent came from, no one could tell. Perhaps he had transcended his religion's requirement of total-immersion baptism, transforming water from a venue for redemption into an element that would never betray him.

But the Ocmulgee was not just a passive playground. In flood, it astonished. Before common sense and urban renewal moved people out of the floodplain, every few years we'd bear witness to high water flooding the shotgun houses in the bottomlands, swilling past the porches all the way up to the eaves. That image from my childhood -- of tawny orange water sweeping around roofs set like boulders in a torrent -- still comes to me in dreams -- truly indelible. And despite many plans to control the Ocmulgee, to channelize it all the way to the Atlantic and to develop the bottomlands, we learned how valuable it was in its natural state in 1994. In the great flood that year, the modest levee failed, but the flood waters were able to disperse and spread into the bottomlands so that Macon and other towns farther downstream were spared greater devastation.

It's true that humans have caused some regrettable losses there. The last known whooping crane in Georgia was shot near Macon in the 1880s, stuffed, and put

on display at the Capitol in Atlanta. I remember seeing it there in a glass case on a grammar-school class trip. And yet the Ocmulgee bottomlands still teem with wildlife. More black bear than anyone expected and reports of sightings of the elusive Florida panther continue to fire the imagination of those who dream and work to keep these river wildlands intact.

Dreams have a long history on the Ocmulgee. A thousand years ago, the Moundbuilders raised great temples on the river's northern banks. They gave the river its name: Ocmulgee, "bubbling, boiling water." In return, the Ocmulgee nourished them physically and spiritually.

Now that I am grown, I still carry the Ocmulgee with me. I live on 50 acres in the country in northeast Georgia, and you won't be surprised to learn that I have my own tiny stream. Each year I find things there I've never seen before – a new wildflower, a new species of tree, and most recently a clump of mountain laurel hugging the stream bank – my own little piece of the Blue Ridge.

Despite living there for 30 years, I still learn from my stream. In geology we have the term "rejuvenation," where either the uplift of land or increased water flow causes a stream to speed up its pace. The stream valley takes on youthful characteristics, cutting deeper into its bed, but it also retains features of older stages as well. My small stream changed its flow pattern last year when it stopped running over the massive root of a tulip poplar and began to burrow underground upstream from its little waterfall. In typical human fashion, I tried to make it resume its old path, to no avail. Only a poem came out of it, called

*The Creek*

*Anonymous streamlet,  
meager headwaters of a minor tributary  
of a branch of the south fork of the Broad River,  
For 29 years, high water and low,  
You gurgled over the tulip poplar root,  
Your waterfall carving a deep pocket in rotten rock.  
Upstream, nothing much happened.  
Sandbars shifted  
And seeps watered wild azaleas.*

*In April when I saw the opening funnel,  
Water boring its way through a crawfish tunnel,  
I thrust a rotten limb into its maw.  
The limb is still there  
But the waters roll  
Into a mocking, gap-toothed hole.*

*The tree root no longer stems the flow.  
Deer prints last for days in sand  
Suspended above a dank underworld.  
The creek digs headward,*

*Cutting deep in its bed  
Stranding sand shoals,  
Exposing more roots and grey clay.*

*The seeps dried up when the bottom fell out.  
When your feet are cut from under you,  
Be ready.*

There are life lessons waiting for all of us to learn from our rivers and streams, lessons to pass on to those who will follow in our footsteps. We often think that we need to take children to spectacular places like Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon to instill in them a love of nature. But today I want to advocate on behalf the everyday, the local, the places all around us that may not seem special to us but can be unforgettable landmarks in a child's mind. This is part of how we develop a sense of place. We need to take the time to look around ourselves, to notice the natural world going on about its business, and to realize that nature is not just a backdrop, some stage-set against which we play out our lives, but truly the crucible of our creation, the world which has made us what we are.

And so I return to my Ocmulgee. For me it remains a living, protean, elemental part of my understanding of landscape, part of nature's context for living my life, just as it was for my people and for those who were there long before us.

The Ocmulgee has been many things: a sacred site, a platform for commerce, a storehouse of living treasures, a place of dreams. And it will be many things, as each generation crafts its own understanding of the river. Sharing this context may have unlikely beginnings -- for me, simply playing with water in a ditch -- but that connection flows to the river, flows to the past, and flows on to generations yet to come.

*Ossabaw  
Canoochee  
Ogeechee*