

“I have been a fan of Jim Zoller’s poetry for over twenty-five years and have been eagerly awaiting the publication of *Living on the Flood Plain*. Whether Zoller’s poems focus on nature, particularly the river, or on his family life, they are always life affirming, though not naively so. Zoller realizes that we must have hope while living in an ‘age easily bored, hungry to laugh but seldom happy,’ but he also understands that life is messy. People get divorced and die just as a river brings both life and destruction.”

**PETER JOHNSON**, winner of the 2001 James Laughlin Award

“In these deeply elemental poems, Jim Zoller finds in the clay and silt of the Genesee River the strata of the human heart. Alongside the current of his patient voice, we compost our ‘darkening stories’ so that we might grow into the light. This collection begins on the flood plain and finally emerges—dripping, gritty and worshipful—on the near edge of higher ground.”

**PAUL J. WILLIS**, author of *Bright Shoots of Everlastingness*

“In this carefully structured collection, Zoller presents several tightly woven sequences of interlocking poems. Many of these pieces are attuned to the turning of seasons—the river’s rise and fall, freeze and thaw. Such closely observed depictions of nature reflect the poet’s spiritual sensibilities in a way that seems reminiscent of Thoreau. While often introspective, they move seamlessly between the personal and the universal: reading the landscape for traces of the past, what could be simply erased if the river should rise, reckoning what is at stake with the loss of a parent, spouse, or child. The landscape he finds harbors memories that remind us of our deepest bonds to one another—‘remind us just who we are’—and the emotions that ultimately mean most. We reenter our lives at moments overwhelmed by what we have learned to recognize as mercy: ‘how/ God so casually and deliberately, with such prodigious and exacting care,/ graces the homely, the feeble, the disrepaired.’ These meditations on landscape and loss ultimately offer a form of redemption as ‘All become[s] testimony ... [to] our letting go.’”

**CHRISTIAN KNOELLER**, winner of the 2007 Midwestern Heritage Prize and author of *Completing the Circle*

“In these poems Jim Zoller bring us close to the land, close to the turn of the seasons, and, yes, to dark days of storm. But the words seek not flash and filigree, but come measured and intelligent, bringing us into the presence of a knowing observer. The voice is patient and considering—the wise voice of father and husband and teacher. These poems do what all good poems should do—take us to a place on earth and make it live, make it matter.”

**MARK DEFOE**, author of *The Rock and the Pebble*

LIVING ON THE FLOOD PLAIN



# LIVING ON THE FLOOD PLAIN

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*for Donna, my life companion,  
and for our small ones, who have  
grown into friends*



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GALLERY ONE:  
*Watercolors & Charcoals*



*Already too much has happened  
that was not supposed to happen,*

---

*Whoever wanted to enjoy the world  
faces an impossible task.*

*Stupidity is not funny.  
Wisdom is not cheerful.*

---

*there are no questions more urgent  
than the naive ones.*

Wisława Szymborska, "The Turn of the Century"



*Watercolors*

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## THE FLOOD PLAIN

The old hills, the ruined tree-covered hills,  
gouged and littered and rounded by the last ice age,

eroded and furrowed by rain and runoff,  
shift little by little, crumble, drift toward the valley.

It will take centuries and more as it has taken centuries.  
The river snakes its way slowly north

following the ancient trail of ice,  
the river-bank graveled and flat,

the water broad and shallow, undercutting banks  
and taking, in its seasonal torrent, trees

and tall grasses along the overhang, rocks and boulders  
released and rolled, gravity borne and water borne

into its wide shallow bed, its untidy trail,  
the valley wide and green, a vast river-fed flood plain.

## WHEN RAIN BEGINS

Leaves of the sycamore, broad  
as grape leaves, hang  
dull and listless.

Hill pastures burn  
brown along the valley  
stretching north and south,  
where the river, sluggish  
and tepid, wanders  
through the dry gravel  
of its bed.

The sun bakes the stones, heats  
pavement beneath my feet,  
lays fiery hands upon my head  
and shoulders.

Before rain comes  
it burdens the air—  
dry air embracing rain  
before it finds ground.

Then begins that steady drumming,  
solid now in the air,  
finding ground,  
a hard wind  
welcomed in a withering land  
that drives weak  
and strong alike  
to shelter.

## WHAT I SAY, WHAT WATER SAYS

When I shout from the hillside vivid with goldenrod  
from unmowed fields, yellow and brown

when I shout toward the river, distant and hidden,  
wandering through sheltering trees

my voice returns, echoing deep in the valley  
my words rise like water from low ground

my voice like a child lost to his visions  
full of sorrow I'd thought buried or drowned

Each hill, as I climb, gives rise to another  
a journey to gain higher ground

each day, I am drawn as shadows turn eastward  
like a rivulet snaking its way toward the river

When I shout from the hillside sodden with rainfall  
from unmowed fields, burdened and bowed

when I empty my voice into rain busied silence  
the river rises and washes it back

the sound of the water is a sound first soothing  
then a fluster, like geese taking flight

the voices of water are peace  
and despair

## STANDING WATER

Where water lies on low ground, grass dies.  
Its smooth surface, that mirrored sky, slowly clouds.  
Water striders haunt its face, mosquito larvae  
hang mysteriously below the blue reflection,  
a mud-turned-dirt ring trails its slow recession.  
Where water finds rest, decay begins.

Who is to say the life that attends its dying—  
frogs, mosquitoes, water bugs, algae, mud life—  
is *less* necessary, *less* worthy, *less* living?

Are we to say *one but not the other*?  
—the falling, streaming, soaking, filling but not  
the wandering, eroding, this hanging around?

And do we not judge, as it drives us away,  
that earthy, once welcoming air turned stink?

## BEYOND THE CREST

We wait for the terrible heat to rise  
bearing its blanket of damp air,  
beneath a sky that remains grey,  
that never lifts, that never turns blue.

I have risen early to work but cannot;  
channels through which thought must pass  
remain as blurred by haze as the distant hills.  
The strong light carries heat but no shadows.

Overnight the river below the house crested  
and began to fall, its filthy sludge  
clinging still, like wreckage, to the trunks  
of shore trees, branches, roots, flaming foliage.

It will clear soon. In a matter of days, perhaps,  
the air too will clear, the mind to follow.

## THE GOOD EARTH

The slow sun lingers, lazy beyond the tree-lined river.  
Morning lies like dew on my skin, morning

honeyed with ripening corn and the sour drift  
of dung, clumped where I stand amidst green stalks.

Though no wind stirs, corn leaves rustle,  
layered on the complex rhythms of locust and crickets.

In the long river valley between Paradise and Bliss,  
I walk in a good place, on earth vivid and rich.

My senses are full. It is not a matter of choice.  
God is good. I am as true a believer as any.

Yet as I skirt the stone marking and closing the old road,  
stand on the broken deck of the doomed bridge,

regard the river, I see myself in the dark current.  
God help me, the weight I bear. I, most blessed of men.

## THE LIFE OF THE RIVER

One would not begin with glaciers.

Begin with moving water,  
at lake-fed streams and springs.

Begin at headwaters, then—this gathering place  
for snowmelt or ground water  
finding its way through rock and sand.

The lake, we say, is spring-fed or snow-fed,  
emits a stream at its lower end—  
and this, too, this stream knows gravity.

When snow melts, dry hills run.

In spring, dry stream beds fill,  
rush madly as rapids, leap

from any high stone in its eagerness  
to become river, to bring life,  
to carry earth on its back.

This is what we say: We say *this river*  
*has life*; we say *this river is life*; or  
we say *this river is like life—it is more*  
*than itself*. When life ends, the river goes on.

So, the headwaters, a beginning, cold,  
a present holding past and future.  
And it means—for us—everything.



*Charcoals*

---



## NEW SNOW

It has begun to snow again,  
dime-sized white flakes filling the air  
as if they were swirling in the dense water  
of a snow globe.

The plow scrapes past with its circling amber light  
and its blade that curls the snow back on itself  
like revolving seasons.

I sit at my table by the window  
at the threshold of a new century  
expecting to write about myself and my times  
expecting somehow a rush of ideas and voices.

Finally, the body I choose is the body I live in.  
Taking whatever tools I have—paints, gestures, words  
table knife or scalpel—  
I begin to cut.

Now the snow has tapered off,  
the temperature drops. No one is on the street,  
no sounds sift through the air.

This might be the end of time,  
the end of the world.

But something tells me—reason, habit, memory,  
faith—that life must continue, that I  
have a tool somewhere to stanch the bleeding.

## ONE MUST SURVIVE

I am acquainted with the labors of poets in an age that sets poets below clowns—in an age easily bored, hungry to laugh but seldom happy.

Each morning—my mind yet uncluttered—I go to my table and find an empty page in my notebook.

Each page is white like snow outside my window, though it bears no marks from deer who come during the night, who graze on the myrtle or nibble, as high as they might reach, the soft needles of the yew.

From the warm distance of my window, I examine these tracks. This is how one begins these labors. Fix the tracks in the mind. Fill the tracks with language, make a mold.

Following tracks is not the same as watching deer whose night travels are nearly silent and whose hungers drive them near our houses while even dogs sleep.

Neither myrtle nor yew make a sound. No sound the page. Only the slow hum of the furnace blowing clouds from its vent.

This winter world of dark and deep cold and continuous snow is a hard world. Behind walls and windows we close our eyes against it, make our bodies small.

It is humbling, being neither farmer nor priest. I have little to show for my morning. The early sun has left my window, its shadows shifted, softened.

I set down my pen, examine my notebook.

Across the page tracks of thought litter the white surface. Something has been pawing all right, finding just here the soft, nourishing needles.

I know the ground. I know the cold. I know hunger.

I know work.

## BREAKING THE ICE

gathering strength in its  
downward rush the stream

flexes beneath ice  
that has held since December

breaks it free of its anchors lifts  
and slides the huge plates from its path

pushes before it the walls  
of its winter prison

as mad, brown water surges  
over and around its banks

looking for a shorter path  
through fields through quiet streets

clamoring to rejoin the rampage  
falling into cellars shouting as it runs

once in that bedlam at the point  
I could no longer hear myself think

—as if it were called  
by the voice of God—

I heard my name

## WHAT THE STREAM SAYS

This morning I hold the cold iron rail  
and lean over the dark roiling water to listen;

fog brought by warm air over thawing ground blots  
even the lowest limbs of the trees.

Upstream, the spring-fed stream rushes from fog  
and vanishes into fog on the far side of the bridge.

The sun tarries. It is dark. I listen.  
The voice of this water carries the voice of all waters.

It is legion, it is multitude, it is choral,  
it draws the ear as fire draws the eye.

It is life force, it is destruction. I listen,  
listen for the sound of drops, of one drop,

the soft plosive *plop plop plop*  
from a leaf as snow melts,

the sound of each falling calling its truer self,  
calling as if *indifferent* life depended on its voice.

## THE INTERVAL

when snow is gone from streets  
and from ground beyond

—snow banks reveal their gritty selves  
grow black and hard  
with sand and silt

the interval between snow  
and excess of daffodils  
is the interval  
we crave and dread

the ugliness of life  
hidden in winter  
overwhelmed by spring  
follows us—waiting

just here, just now  
—to remind us just who we are

## ROMANCE OF AIR AND BONES

Along the dead-end street  
you and I walk hand in hand,

listening to the soft snow  
drifting through this gray afternoon,

watching flakes light upon  
our dark winter clothes.

When you speak,  
dark-limbed trees lean in,

the sky brightens.

When you speak, your words

appear in the cold air,  
land upon my ears and lashes,

white grows transparent  
—your day my day float,

dance in air weightless as snow,  
lightened by love and talk

—those ephemeral white crystals,  
commonplace of true companions.