



# Poets of Place

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SELECT POEMS BY  
ST. CROIX VALLEY POETS

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Heidi Barr - Mike Forecki - Lee Kisling  
Rosetta Peters - River Urke



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NEA Big Read is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest. NEA Big Read in the St. Croix Valley is presented by ArtReach St. Croix in conjunction with core program partners including Valley Bookseller, Stillwater Public Library, and library branches located in communities between St. Croix Falls, WI and Hastings, MN.



ArtReach St. Croix is a nonprofit regional arts organization committed to the mission of *connecting communities and the arts* throughout the St. Croix Valley. ArtReach supports the work of artists and arts organization through events, marketing initiatives and education opportunities that foster and celebrate the visual, literary and performing arts in the St. Croix Valley. The work of ArtReach St. Croix is made possible through generous donations from individuals and grants from foundations.

Visit [artreachstcroix.org](http://artreachstcroix.org) to learn more.



## **The *Poets of Place* Project**

For the 8th year in a row, the St. Croix Valley has been chosen as a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Big Read community. The NEA Big Read in the St. Croix Valley is a one book, one community program that brings together residents from throughout the lower St. Croix Valley, in Minnesota and Wisconsin, around a common book. Programming in 2022 is centered on themes found in *An American Sunrise* by U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo and is facilitated by ArtReach St. Croix and other regional partners including many St. Croix Valley libraries.

One of those art program opportunities is *Poets of Place*. Similar to a poet laureate program, the *Poets of Place* program seeks to be representative of the rich and diverse cultures of poetry in the region. ArtReach St. Croix is pleased to announce five St. Croix Valley poets who are advocates and ambassadors for poetry and creativity in the lower St. Croix Valley.



# Heidi Barr

Heidi lives in Lindstrom, MN with her husband and daughter, where they tend to a large vegetable garden, explore nature and do their best to live simply.

She works as a wellness coach, holds a master's degree in Faith and Health Ministries and is the Managing Editor of *Wayfarer Magazine*. Author of several books of nonfiction, she is committed to cultivating ways of being that are life-giving and sustainable for people, communities, and the planet. Her latest book, *Slouching Toward Radiance*, was published by Homebound Publications in 2022.



# Life on Earth

We—you and I; them and us—  
we're like a great web,

spider silk stretching out  
beyond horizons

Aspen roots intertwined  
binding us together

clouds of misty fog  
permeating our cells over here

and theirs over there.

In some ways we live apart, yet

we remain connected  
through space and across time

all generations and species  
colors and creeds

different parts yet one body  
of blood and bone, soil and sky.



# Star Child

Be absorbed

by a new moon  
slicing a night sky

by river ice  
cracking in creation

by skeletal trees  
cloaked in frost

by cold air  
directing attention

by a million stars  
calling you by a name you used to know

one that was part of you  
before you were born.

Be absorbed  
by what you already are.

# Mike Forecki



Mike divides his time between the bluffs near Osceola, WI overlooking the St. Croix River and Florida's southern Gulf Coast. For the past 40 years, he has lived and practiced law in Western Wisconsin. He holds a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in Philosophy from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 1981, he received a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He started writing poetry when he semi-retired almost ten years ago. His poems are published in various magazines, including *Bramble*, *Barstow and Grand* and *Volume One*.

# The Day Spilled from the Front Porch

It's early evening and I'm a cliché:  
an old man sitting  
in a rocker on the front porch.  
I hear nothing but  
the crowded trees:  
birch, beech, basswood,  
white pine and pin oak mostly.  
I hear them shutter  
their new hive of leaves,  
a persistent hum  
like a distant highway.

Now, in June, the colors  
are again wet – deep greens  
all the way to black. Again  
the trees are capped  
by light before the sun sets, again  
they lie inverted on the grass  
and their crosshatched shadows blur.

I know I am renewing also,  
my aging cells dividing at  
a diminishing pace, continuing closer  
to that last, selfless stage of renewing.  
Evening arrives and ravens stalk  
the fallen oak branch  
still poised on my front lawn.  
Under these newly darkened skies,  
stars are quietly exploding  
in a banal, larger renewal.

# With Our Words

With our words (words!),  
we try to cast a net over  
the stars.

We can do  
nothing else.

So *real* this evening's fragrance  
of Japanese lilacs,  
the sop of dewed grass under  
our bare feet.

We taste  
the rising mist,  
we call out  
the fireflies  
that pinpoint  
this rural road.

*You must lean  
towards becoming, you say.  
When you see this way  
you uncover the bloom  
inside the seed,  
the god  
in the ageless child.*

Sometimes I do lean,  
sometimes I pretend  
not to hear  
that other becoming:  
that quiet, deniable angel,

Gabriel, messaging  
the end of times.

Equanimous me:  
sometimes I pass over  
beginnings also -  
the sun trapped inside  
the dawn mist above  
the cornfield,  
the monarch caterpillars  
raised inside bins  
by our granddaughters.

I want to say:  
We are hardly young,  
our swords are not wooden,  
our escapades  
not risk-less,  
not orchestrated  
by those early imaginings - when  
we could not imagine  
loss or pain or cruelty or death.

Until we can  
and we carry that knowing  
with us always:  
Just some stars are seen,  
fewer seeds break  
the baked earth's crust,  
only some young  
will be cared for.



# Lee Kisling

Lee has lived in Hudson, WI since 1988. He is a working poet, a retired engineer of railroad signal systems and has been married for almost 50 years. He is a father of two and a grandfather. He graduated from Hamline University in 2014 with a degree in Creative Writing. He has several published works, including his novel *The Fools' War*, a chapbook of poetry titled *The Lemon Bars of Parnassus* and a book of small poems titled *Add to Cart*. He has also had his poems published in many small presses and journals, and one of his poems was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.



# Counting Railroad Cars

Do you love me, he asked,  
as he often asks, knowing she will say  
uh huh, and she likes being asked—this  
equals one railroad car. Also, in his voice  
that it matters to him – another boxcar.  
Their short time together passes by.  
Words make a whole train with swaying cars  
and he hears the rhythmic squeal of stuck brakes  
and the drum bang of iron wheels over uneven joints,  
the train moves past – picking up speed in the poem,  
the car-counting love song echoes in his brain –  
the song factory which is also the room  
he goes to for the wide-open space –  
high ceiling and railyard acoustics  
and sometimes he composes  
melodies on the fiddle.



## If I had a hardware store

I would hire you to be in charge of  
mailboxes and hinges and grass seed  
and paint. You would assist the Saturday men  
mulling their ten penny thoughts,  
walk them twice past the big yellow gloves,  
find for them the barn red, the flat white –  
the three-in-one, the miter box for angle cuts.  
They are not here for love or bargains  
–needing shank and steel. Still, you might  
advise them – self-sharpening is best, tempered glass,  
handles with rubber grips and this: buy two  
in case one breaks or give it to your boy who  
never says much.

# Rosetta Peters

Rosetta is a poet, an author, a public speaker, an activist and a resident of Marine on St. Croix, MN. She is of Yankton, Crow Creek and Oglala descent. Rosetta is a procrastinator to the point of detriment and lover of the natural world. Rosetta has had her poetry published in the *Yellow Medicine Review*. She was recently awarded the Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant to professionally record and release an album of her spoken word and performance poetry and the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council Next Step Grant for creative support for the completion of her memoir, *The Spider and The Rose*.



# Shhhhhh

I don't yet know how to write us.  
Fear of losing has kept the pen from my hand  
This love, both archaic and new,  
A creek spilling into her river.  
I am a rushing thing—a white capped current,  
Wild and polluted  
And I don't want to contaminate you with the refuse I carry.  
Bruised Budweiser cans and Marlboro Red cigarette butts  
Looking a lot like PTSD and depression litter the shorelines  
of this body.  
And what of you?  
What sediments erode your agated heart?

*Shhhhhh*

I did not come to muddy your lapping waves.  
Besides, none of that matters anyway.  
We are nature.  
Creek  
River  
Stone  
And every bend has brought us here – to this gentle confluence.

# A Letter to my Daughter

it is time, baby girl.  
from this point on  
every choice that you make will be an answer  
Who do you want to be?  
What kind of woman?

be a tire swing  
a child's first jump rope.  
be a glow worm  
or a Canada goose.

be the mason's thumbprint that is left  
in the mortar between the stones.

be a walk in the woods  
be a paper birch in a forest of pines  
be the first step that is taken off trail  
be no internet connection  
no signal  
a dropped call.

be a walking stick for others

be the lover's tree  
or better still,  
be the stone that is picked from the earth,  
the one used to chisel the heart around their names  
that is still carried in a pocket today.

be the breath that is taken  
the courage to try  
be the first kiss

be the Aspen's dance, baby

the cello wind

be juniper berry bold

be the first leaf to change its color in the fall

but the last to drop from the tree

be the No. 2 pencil

no, be the poets hand

you're the author

revise

revise

and revise some more.

and my darling sweet girl,

whatever you do

just be.



# River Urke



River has the heart of a poet and the eyes of an artist. Currently, she resides in River Falls, WI with her cat, Niko. River's poetic writings and artistic touches reflect the principles she lives by where imperfection is beauty, nature is appreciated, and knowledge is gold. In addition, her work is heavily influenced by her battle with multiple sclerosis, and her native blood. Often, River integrates her poetry and art into one artistic piece. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Stumbled & Standing* and *when spirits touch*, and a non-fiction, *Women's Obsession with Shoes*. River is a contributor in six anthologies including the 2014 *St. Paul Almanac* and the 2017 *Yellow Medicine Review*. She is the host of a monthly literary event online, *Up Close: Meet the Poet Behind the Verse*. In addition, River is a member of the League of MN Poets and the Mississippi Valley Poets.

# The Prize

*dedicated to Brandy Brenna & Pat Kealy*

Three good friends canoe down the Kinni  
each with their own bag of thoughts.

They cruise along the river's course  
under the veil of Whitman's song  
passing hidden places  
as they coast into calmer waters  
a faint whistle is heard above  
before any of them see...

An Eagle great in essence and size  
plunges into the river  
grabbing a huge trout in his claws  
he hovers over the water...

The fisherman in the rear  
only notices the fish  
the artist in the front  
only sees the bird  
but in the center, the dreamer  
witnesses the marvel of both.

Hovering, the Eagle  
flaps his powerful wings  
before flying away with his prize.



# Where are you from?

I'm from the rich, dark soil  
that grew your grandma's food,  
the one that kept her long braid  
and made frybread with chili.

I'm from the cool, crisp waters  
that flow behind your house,  
the river that bathes your stones  
and sings you lullabies.

I'm not ignoring the question,  
just getting to it a round-about way.

You ask where I'm from.  
I'm from the places I call home,  
the city of my youth by big waters  
and the valley that holds me now.

But wait, you want to know my roots  
the home of my ancestral blood.

I'm a woman of the Earth  
swimming in the waters,  
a city dweller and a country gal.

I am Anishinaabekwe,  
an Ojibwe woman  
and I'm an American mutt too.

I am the first generation coming home.

***We acknowledge that ArtReach St. Croix occupies land that is the ancestral home of the Wahpekute people and the larger Očhéthi Šakówiŋ—Seven Fires Council—alliance of Dakota tribes.***

The Dakota people today are here and maintain deep connections to this land and its stories despite genocide and forced relocation.

ArtReach St. Croix will build and strengthen relationships with Indigenous people who currently or in the future call the St. Croix Valley home. ArtReach looks to amplify artists' voices and draws on the arts to connect communities to their stories, and to each other.



