

On Taking Students to the Millstone River and Re-Considering the Category of Fieldwork

Nomi Stone

Our classroom is small, the world,
large. Through everything,
a river passes.

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Before piping it under the earth,
this town was a river. The mind
rushes water into the library, into Spring
Street's yards, red brick apartments,
once a spring. Park the car below:
bright puddles round the pipes.

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Following GoogleMaps, all 12 in a van,
we choose stops: by the parking lot
of Penn Medical, through icy grass
and trash to the river, gathering what
charisma we can find. Reeds are lit in the sun.
Deer droppings *blaze up into golden stones*.
Drive another bend to Shep Lee, who left
Merrill Lynch to farm pears with his wife: near
the river, but not near enough. They dig a well.
Fieldworkers hold a recorder to Lee's
lips: "What do the pears taste like?" We try
to find the old mill, but where it was is
Modway, industrial storage facility. Behind it,
the river. After, I ask, does it feel closer?
My student *Elijah* says, Well it's in my shoes.

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Anglers dart American shad
and drop flutter spoons
as bait. Shad fly against
the river, up ladders
of water. Fieldworkers write
in notebooks. They set it down.

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I'm trained as a social scientist.
For centuries now we've made maps,
noted kin, drawn boxes around what
we know. Oh friend, can I learn

how to see it, the world—electric,
bright, terrible, and beautiful—but
not turn it into food?

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Fieldworkers climb into a dank, cooled
beaver den.

We'd read about a zoologist, Charles Foster, who wanted
to become animal, to know

their secrets. Why not? Greek Gods did it to spy
on mortals. As a child,

Charles collected blackbird tongues, listened
to mudflats.

We too, he argued, have golgi tendons, muscle spindles
to register space. One

bird has as many receptors on its beak as
a clitoris. It nuzzles

towards a worm. Horse chestnuts stir in the wind.
He chooses

to be a badger and live in a burrow, even
bringing his son.

Finally writes, "This is Charles Foster, writing
about being an animal." Language

is the tunnel the world rushes through.

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Thirty-eight miles long, the river crosses
Sweetman, Applegarth, the Turnpike:
our part flows into the Lake, siphoned
in 1903 for Princeton rowers, who build
their torsos as above them swans pass.

We meet a man who paints the river
chocolate brown speckled with reflections
of trees. Another who lives above it,
sleeps to it. You can't drink it or wash
your face in it. But some people love it.

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Turtles are drunk from 8 months
of sleep: you could pluck them
from the mud. *Jasmine* and *Zoe* find one
with a maimed face. The students point
their iPhones there. I do too. *Elijah*
lifts it above his head, then carries it.
To the water.

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Willa records the rain
falling on the trees
into the Millstone.

It isn't special unless
everything is special.
But everything is special.

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Paddling under honeysuckle branches, *Elijah* finds a nest
of four teal-green eggs, pillowed with feathers
and mud. *Don't touch it.* I'm not very good

at paddling, but I keep going, til my shoulders burn, til the
Box around the river
falls away. The Field grows and grows to hold the boy's
wet shoes, the mall where he bought them, just past Macy's.
And the hole

he falls through whenever he is sad. The trees at the park and
the swans. And the stars.

I meant from here to the stars, moving like quick currents
between us. So much faster than we could write it down.

Note: this poem incorporates a fragment of a line
from James Wright, "blaze up into golden stones"

(Originally published in *American Poetry Review*)