

For a Dedication by the River

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...that you, the sons and daughters of the commonwealth might have
better educational service.” — Gov. Emanuel L. Philipp, Oct. 19, 1916

There was more to know than time to learn, further to go than good roads to get there. Nevertheless, the governor crossed the state in a Pierce Arrow — cornfields, hillsides of Holsteins, cranberry bogs ripening to red, back when most streets still rang with horses' hooves and harness.

One in ten had telephones. The countryside was wireless in the old way. Even the Great War seemed distant though already the ditches were dug where local sons and brothers would die.

But there was more in the air than harm to come — radical things — crowns were falling over the world like cottonwood leaves onto the river here. Women on the verge of the vote. A scientist dreamed up a theory that bent space and time that year, claimed truth depended upon where you stood.

But the wildest notion? — Enacted here — that not just the glittering sons of the rich, but the daughters and sons of farmers and mill hands might learn the art of how we learn, and how we pass it on.

The townspeople knew what all immigrants know — What terrifies a tyrant? An open book. An open mind. Somebody made a speech. Somebody raised a flag. Somebody probably talked too long. Someone's mind began to drift toward the river, the braided currents that carved and cradled the town, light struck, reflective where they rippled over sandstone and wound through the outskirts of time...

Where half a century later, our first grade teacher, Mrs. Sinuefield, arranged us in rows, the terrifying alphabet scrolled above the blackboard, two shapes for each letter, then numbers tumbling from everywhere and nowhere, far beyond the reckoning of fingers and toes.

There was a tilted metal globe you could spin and see the jigsawed nations blur in and out of blue. She tapped a fingernail on the world's curve — *We're here*, she said with an accent from somewhere further South. She seemed older than the Bible to me, though now I know she was much younger than I am, remembering this.

She knew everything, even thoughts inside our heads — who tucked gum beneath his tongue, who leaned toward the smartest girl on spelling tests. Whose mind wondered, wandered, withered in place. Such things to learn — why put a letter in a word if it makes no sound? How can zero, which is nothing, make numbers bigger than before? Once she bent back my palm, smacked it with a wooden ruler donated by a local lumber yard. Strange, I remember the smack, the sting, the company name, but not the sin.

Stranger still, by year's end, the terrifying letters were somewhat tamed. A flock of them might flutter down to perch on sharpened pencil points. Sing us something from inside. Even the numbers began to behave. There was a sign to make them vanish, and a sign to make them mount. It was as if imagination built an ark of knowing we rode above the waters, or maybe knowing *was* the water, and how we rose, the wonder.

Pay attention, Mrs. Sinuefield said, with a voice inside my head. I feared and loved her in equal parts, and the fear was how far there was to go, and the love was how, in time, unlikely as it seemed, I slowly came to *be* her, to stand up front and know she only knew what that long gone governor knew, those townspeople knew, what the current of the river always knows — to keep it coming, you have to pass it on.

Somebody makes a speech. Somebody, maybe me, talks a little too long. Someone's mind wanders toward the river still carving and cradling this town. I once saw a grown man cry from the footbridge there as the late light crested the current, not out of sadness, but for the moment itself, beauty so brief it breaks your heart just to mend it, for in the wake of such comes a bigger heart.

Pay attention, she said, and the world's blue blur spins again in heart and head. And now, how strange to know she only knew what the weeping man on the footbridge knew, what all the elders knew —

here in the diminished light of harvest, though Holsteins graze the hillsides and cranberry bogs are bursting red, it's by cultivating wonder the commonwealth is fed.