

Words & ideas by Mark Morelli

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Going Places, Who Knows Where

by Mark Morelli, *Vincent Brothers Review*, 2002

I am drawn to both the sea and the river but they both move my mind and heart in different ways.

The sea is like a cat. It comes in. It goes out. It comes in. It goes out.

The sea has a day job. The sea is a commuter. The sea goes out early but is home for supper. The sea is Willy Loman.

The river is linear. On occasion it may gush and overflow, but it has direction. It is going places. It is on to bigger things. The River is Willy Loman's brother, Ben. It passes by once in a lifetime and never returns.

"What do you mean, the river never returns? The river is always there!"

That is an illusion. Throw a stick into the river and it floats away, gone forever. But the sea is also a dog. Throw a stick into the sea and the sea will fetch it and bring it back to you.

Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Its very name connotes two things: Man-made industry, the port. And the entrance to a larger body of water. The mouth of the Piscataqua River in Portsmouth empties into the nearby Atlantic Ocean. When I lived in this beautiful New England town, I spent many hours at the pier in Prescott Park on the edge of the Strawberry Banke, where the first white settlers lived.

Once I stood there for an hour and watched walrus folk in the river. Walrus are sea mammals. They looked like they'd be more at home in stiller, lolling waters where they could languish instead of here at a busy part of the Piscataqua River where the bridge raised and lower when boats came through, where lobstermen and their boats sliced through the water each day as if it were an interstate highway. Here it was a salt water river, the Saint Peter's gate of the Piscataqua. It was just miles away from its final destination, the Atlantic, and for all I knew the walrus -- like the dolphins men imagined to be mermaids -- were the angels that took the spirit of the river and welcomed it to the world of the sea.

I believe this might be so because the river and the sea are different.

In bitter winters I spent as many hours as I could walking along that New England coastline. The frigid weather and the vastness of the sea joined with the countless stars in the black sky to form Weather, Water and Sky, a ghostly trinity of natural force that enveloped me, intimidated me, and at the same time, delighted me with its ring-around-the-rosy enchantment. The Cold, the Water and the Stars blessed me with the awesome gift of smallness, giving me the recognition that hit TV shows and magazine covers mean nothing more in the big picture than a butterfly's last breath means to you and me.

Hemingway's Old Man faced the sea as the final challenge. Twain's Huck took to his river for freedom. In Viking burials, the dead are shoved out adrift and aflame at sea. It is the end. But the River churns grist mills. The River makes bread. The River doesn't join hands with any other great ghosts. Unlike the sea, the river does not cleanse or humble me. The River does not make me feel small. I haven't spent a lot of time looking at rivers in natural surroundings. So rivers remind me of *human* history. Suspension bridges and smokestacks. Skylines and tunnel entrances. Docks and shipping ports. If the riverfront industry is long dead, then I see the turned up collars of vagrants and all the other monkey business that keeps the waterfronts busy with unmarked cars and clandestine package drops. Cities and factories. Restaurants and marinas. Instead of million-miles-away stars twinkling over a black sea. I see winking headlights of cars where couples go parking.

When my daughters were seven and three, I decided it was time to give them the gift of the Cuyahoga River, the river that runs through Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. After a year living here my girls still hadn't come face to face with any wild stretch of the river. I wanted them to feel the energy of the body of water for which their town was named.

We drove down a winding road to a park, hiked on the path till it took us to a part of the river where no homes or other buildings could be seen. Other than one old fellow across the river with a pole and line and two kayakers who passed by, we were alone with the Cuyahoga River.

"We're here," I said, gathering stones.

"To do what? What?" they asked about the loud gushing river.

"This." I pitched stones across the surface.

A half hour later they were still whipping stones across the water. I made

them little piles of stones. None of us spoke. The older one mimicked my sidearm toss and got the hang of it. The little one tossed branches in just to watch them float away.

"There goes another one of my boats," she said.

"Those sticks will float all the way to Cleveland and to Lake Erie," I said.
"And who knows where after that!"

"Cool!" said the older one, tossing in a big branch that bobbed in the water before setting course in the current. She was just grasping the fact that it was gone, never to be seen again. I could see her imagining that she touched something that was now going somewhere, but who knows where.