

## MARIE BENDER

*Valley Green*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 8 x 8 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## LIZ KELLEBREW

### What a River Needs

A history with the  
Cowlitz River in Washington

**T**he Cowlitz River was a source of wonder in my youth, a place where my sister and I walked the dogs and waded in the shallows, skipping smooth river rocks. When heavy rains caused the river to rise and flood its banks, we stood at the edge and watched the gray water churn, the wind and rain chilling us through our plaid shirts down to the skin. In summer, the chirping of crickets and the buzz of motorcycles from the racetrack filled the air. When the comet Hale-Bopp arrived, we went to the river almost nightly for several weeks. The comet's paintbrush stroke of light made the stars look dim by comparison, even the brighter ones like my personal favorites, Deneb and Vega. At sixteen, I liked to stay up late to stargaze, strumming songs of unrequited love on my garage-sale guitar.

My third-great-grandmother Marilla was already married by age fifteen. She boated the Cowlitz River long before the railroad or paved roads appeared. The Cowlitz and Chehalis traded along the river, bringing supplies to pioneer farms and trading salmon for butter, potatoes, and eggs. The Cowlitz River was the road as far as anyone was concerned, linking to the Columbia River, the Pacific Ocean, and places afar.

Could this be why I was drawn there in my teens to walk along the sandy banks? In the little town of Castle Rock, no one ever went anywhere. But the river was the promise of a way out, a path to explore, a connection to the rest of the world and maybe the cosmos itself.

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The June 2021 heat wave was the worst recorded in Washington State. By that time, I'd long ago satisfied my yen for living in bustling cities, and I'd survived the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns. I missed my family and my childhood home, so two months after the heat wave, I went to Castle Rock for a visit. The sun was high and white in the gray-cloud sky where my mother and sister and I were about to harvest corn. We'd gone to a you-pick vegetable farm on land that Marilla and her husband had once owned.

Canada geese flew down to the glassy surface of a pond with a totem pole next to it. One Douglas fir towered over the farmhouse that Marilla's husband, John, had built in the 1860s. Instead of facing the driveway, the front door

faced the vegetable plot and a levee topped with railroad tracks, with the river on the other side. Back when the house was built, the river had been the road.

Despite the continuing drought, sunflowers and cornstalks towered above me as the scent of rich river soil filled my nose. The closeness of the river and the pond must have kept the garden well watered even through the worst of the heat. A century and a half ago, this land was waterfront property, with the riverbank coming right up to the edge. After the eruption of Mount Saint Helens in 1980 and the subsequent dredging of sediment from the river, the boundary of the land changed. So did the course of the river itself.

I didn't remember how to pull the corn off the stalk, so Mom gave me a demonstration. After squeezing an ear to check for plump kernels, she grabbed the stalk above the ear and, with her other hand, twisted the corn down. It ripped off easily. Anthers and pollen shook loose from the tassels and dusted our hair as we waded through the close-planted rows of corn, swiping invasive Himalayan blackberry vines out of our way.

The Cowlitz may be slow and meandering now, but her waters once ran wild. Before the eruption and the dredging, back when my ancestors used the river as a road, the river was faster and deeper. The Native Cowlitz people built dugout cedar canoes to navigate its swift currents, and the river also came to bear their name.

Regardless of the era, the river has always started out small, a trickle off the slopes of Mount Rainier. Everything starts with a seed, after all, a zygote, an atom. The trickle of a melting mountain glacier builds into a seep, a creek, a waterfall, a stream, and then the water changes bodies yet again and claims the shape of river, estuary, ocean wide.

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I came into this world with a bang. Just a few short weeks after my birth, Mount Saint Helens erupted, changing the course of the river and flooding much of the surrounding land. My baby portraits share a page in the family photo album with photos of the ash cloud as seen from our backyard.

Silt and gravel from volcanic mudflows, or lahars, clogged the Toutle and Cowlitz Rivers with fifteen extra feet of sediment. The Cowlitz lost 85 percent of its flow capacity. The mudflows took out twenty-seven bridges and nearly two hundred homes, and the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers estimated that fifty thousand more residents were in danger of severe flooding thanks to the amount of debris that had filled up the riverbeds.

In another age, the towns along the threatened parts of the river would have been abandoned, and the rivers allowed to reclaim the land. But with modern technology at our disposal, the rivers were dredged instead. Fifty-four million cubic yards of sediment were removed from the Cowlitz River alone. Ashy, fine sand was piled into an enormous levee on the east bank of the river in Castle Rock, and huge dunes of silt rested on top of that, creating the landscape that I would come to know as my own. Eventually, a sediment retention dam was built upstream, but debris from Mount Saint Helens continues to flow off the mountain into the Toutle River and from there into the Cowlitz.

The bed of my river is changing still. The earth continues to form herself. Why would she do anything different?

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The changes to the Cowlitz riverbed weren't all from Mount Saint Helens. The dredge spoils that were pulled out after the eruption ended up on the riverbanks and, in some cases, got dumped in other parts of the river or in tributary streams. This prevented vegetation from growing on the riverbanks, slowed down the river flow, and changed the substrate from coarse sand and small gravel to fine sand and silt, further destroying the spawning habitat of one of Cowlitz County's most beloved annual visitors, the eulachon smelt.

Smelt were a food source for Indigenous people and pioneers like my ancestor Marilla, and they are still eaten by local residents, including the Cowlitz Tribe. Notoriously oily, these small fish were also used as candles; you could dry them and light their tails like a wick. Similar to the salmon that feast upon them, the eulachon smelt hatch in freshwater rivers, migrate to the ocean, and return to spawn in their natal rivers as adults, dying after their final act of creation. As they decay, their bodies bring marine nutrients back into the river ecosystem, feeding the groundwater and enriching the soil, making it possible to grow fields of plump corn in the midst of a historic drought.

The smelt usually return to the Cowlitz River in late winter, around February. Seagulls, sea lions, and the

Chinook salmon that eat the smelt follow them upriver, too. So do people. The river is still a sort of road, after all.

During the smelt runs of my childhood, I saw entire families wearing galoshes and dipping nets into the river, pouring gleaming smelt into five-gallon buckets. You could batter and fry the fresh fish and smoke the rest for later. From 1938 to 2000, the Cowlitz River smelt runs averaged about 1,170,000 pounds per year on the commercial landings alone. But the numbers dwindled rapidly from then on. In 2008, the Cowlitz Tribe helped get the eulachon smelt listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. In 2018, the whole region reported only 110 pounds of netted smelt.

Several factors affect the decreasing smelt numbers, including warming ocean and river temperatures, hydro-power dams that hamper the river flow, and pollution from contaminated sediment. But the effects of dredging on the smelt's spawning habitat can't be denied. Smelt eggs suffocate when they're laid in silt instead of coarser sand or gravel. When the larvae hatch, they rely on sufficient river flow to help carry them out to salt water. And the stockpiles of dredging spoils continue to erode, contributing to more fine sediment buildup, low flow, and poor water quality in the Cowlitz. Work is being done to offset the effects of the dredging, but there's not a lot of funding, and there's not a lot of time.

One thing's clear: fish need a river, and a river needs fish. People need them both.

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Castle Rock used to be a logging town. Marilla's husband logged their land and sold the lumber, shipping it out by train. But nothing lasts forever, and sometimes that's a good thing. By the 1990s, out-of-work loggers were painting polka dots on wooden rods and selling them at the fair with a sign that read "Save the spotted dowels."

I had nothing against the spotted owls, nor did I have any interest in professions that chopped down my beloved trees. The hills surrounding our town were covered in evergreens, except for the artificial hills of volcanic silt that topped the levee.

My siblings and I rode our toboggan down the sides of those dunes, sneezing amid the yellow Scotch broom and the fine particles from the volcano's heart. Grasshoppers

flew and rabbits leaped out of the brush with every step we took. At the base of the levee, among the round river stones, we once found a pool of tiny silver fish, marooned by the ebbing tide.

They might have been smelt. They were too small for us to tell. We scooped them up in our hands and released them into the dark cool of the river. Of course we did. What else could we do? Small fry ourselves, little fish in a little pond, longing for the greater depth and flow of the river of life.

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My family has always lived along rivers, which have been a source of life and death. Life-giving food and water. Swift-moving currents and death. Marilla's brother drowned in the Snake River when her family crossed it on the Oregon Trail, and her grandson James drowned in the Cowlitz when the bank beneath his feet collapsed during a storm. More likely, he committed suicide, or so I've been told.

My own brother nearly drowned in the same river while learning to swim. And then there was the flood that threatened us all.

The river went where it wasn't supposed to go. We kids weren't surprised. It was a river, after all. You couldn't tell it where to go. That would be like telling the sun to go backward, or telling the ocean to pack up and leave. It wouldn't get you very far.

It started with a storm. The rain and wind knocked the power out. It was daytime, though, and the library was still open. Enough gray afternoon light came in through the windows for my sister and me to sign our names on the checkout cards that the librarian filed away. We tucked our books under our flannel overshirts to protect them from the rain. Across the street at the grocery store, the freezer cases had been emptied and put into cold storage, but the generator kept the lights on long enough for us to spend our paper route earnings on Dr. Pepper and Mother's Double Fudge Cookies.

We were rain soaked and shivering, but we still stopped to look at the river on the way home. Two blocks from our house, the river had come nearly to the top of the levee, its churning waves alarmingly close to our feet. Parts of the opposite bank were already flooded.

Our neighbor, a city utility worker, told us that the floodwaters had cut us off from the interstate on both sides

of town. Even if we tried to leave, it would be pointless. We were already too late.

But that fact didn't bother us. We'd grown up poor. We were used to being powerless. Our electricity was shut off for nonpayment as often as it went out due to bad weather. We wore clothes that the neighbor kids had outgrown, which their parents dropped off on our doorstep in brown paper bags. We knew how to make the most of other people's rejected food from the food bank. One particularly hungry day, the last day before my stepdad's unemployment check came through, my sister and I made a pizza crust from Jiffy Corn Muffin Mix and topped it with tomato paste and olives. To this day it's one of the best pizzas I've ever tasted, a phenomenon I attribute to our momentary triumph over hunger. Our creative baking was a way to reclaim our power.

Access to electricity is called "having power," which makes sense, because it gives people power to do things. If you have power, you can run machines that do the work of keeping you warm or cool, clean, well-fed, and entertained. You can turn on the lights, turn up the heat, and keep the realities of the natural world at bay. At some point in history, being without power came to mean that you were poor. Powerless in two senses of the word.

When the river flooded, we became powerless in yet a third sense. We were at the river's mercy. Even after the water receded, we never forgot that the river was the true source of power.

But powerful as it may be, a river is never a river alone. A river needs a mountain with a glacier to feed it. To keep going, it needs more water: clouds and rain. A river needs connections, other rivers and streams. It needs nutrients from fish to feed the plants on its banks so their roots prevent erosion, allowing the river to flow freely and keeping the water clean. Finally, a river needs an ocean, a greater dream.

What a river needs is not so different from what people need.

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Maybe I was a smelt in a past life, because no matter how far the river of life takes me on its journey to the sea, I will come home to the river of my birth. I hope I always remember the way my mom looked that day in the cornfield.

Strong and beautiful, the joy of our being together evident on her face. The same arms that had cradled me and helped me walk twisting corn off the stalk for the dinner table. The women in my family have a history of strong arms. They had to, to thrive on a pioneer homestead, to raise children and hunt and harvest and cook.

When my ancestor Marilla was in her older years, she said she'd never had help as a young wife living by the Cowlitz River in the nineteenth century. She'd shot her own game, paddled canoes, made soap and clothes, and given birth to her children on her own. She'd ridden two days on horseback with her infant daughter to visit her parents in Olympia.

But I know the river helped her. It gave her a means of travel, connections with the Indigenous people who traded goods, and a swift way to reach other people and places before there were highways or trains. It brought salmon and smelt to her doorstep and water for her garden on land that still grows food today.

It's no exaggeration to say this river is the reason I'm alive.

A few short miles from Marilla's farmhouse, Mom and I cooked dinner, chicken breast and wild rice. As our corn simmered on the stove in water sourced from the river, I looked out the kitchen window into the backyard. Cats sprawled near a rusted lawn mower, and seed potatoes filled a corner of the garden plot. Red cherry tomatoes swelled on their vines, bursting with juice. There was the picnic table where I used to sit and stargaze, wood gone gray and sagging into the crabgrass, and ivy crept up the base of the cherry tree, hoping for a taste of its bittersweet fruit.

For a moment, I thought the wild was reclaiming this place. But then I realized the wild had never left.

**Liz Kellebrew** was born in Oregon and raised in Castle Rock, Washington. She won the Miracle Monocle Award for Innovative Writing, and she was a finalist for the Calvino Prize. Her poetry book, *Water Signs*, is due out September 2022. Her work has been published in journals such as *Room*, *About Place*, and *The Conium Review*. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Goddard College and currently lives on Bainbridge Island, Washington, where she is a technical writer and a Kitsap Salmon Tour docent. She is a member of the Academy of American Poets.

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*Spheres*, 2014  
Oil on linen, 24 x 38 in.



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