

The Ottawa River By Night

Poème gracieusement offert par Margaret Atwood en soutien de la désignation de la rivière des Outaouais au titre de rivière du patrimoine

In the full moon you dream more.
I know where I am: the Ottawa River
far up, where the dam goes across.
Once, midstorm, in the wide cold water
upstream, two long canoes full
of children tipped, and they all held hands
and sang till the chill reached their hearts.
I suppose in our waking lives that's the best
we can hope for, if you think of that moment
stretched out for years.

Once, my father
and I paddled seven miles
along a lake near here
at night, with the trees like a pelt of dark
hackles, and the waves hardly moving.
In the moonlight the way ahead was clear
and obscure both. I was twenty
and impatient to get there, thinking
such a thing existed.

None of this
is in the dream, of course. Just the thick square-
edged shape of the dam, and eastward
the hills of sawdust from the mill, gleaming as white
as dunes. To the left, stillness; to the right,
the swirling foam of rapids
over sharp rocks and snags; and below that, my father,
moving away downstream in his boat, so skilfully
although dead, I remember now; but no longer as old.
He wears his grey hat, and evidently
he can see again. There now,
he's around the corner. He's heading eventually
to the sea. Not the real one, with its sick whales
and oil slicks, but the other sea,
where there can still be safe arrivals.

Only a dream, I think, waking
to the sound of nothing.
Not nothing. I heard: it was a beach, or shore,
and someone far off, walking.
Nowhere familiar. Somewhere I've been before.
It always takes a long time
to decipher where you are.