

# The Ottawa River By Night

*Poem donated by Margaret Atwood in support of Ottawa River heritage designation*

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.