
PRACTICE

"Downstream Effects"

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This poem describes a riverine flood that occurred on Salt Creek (the Little Des Plaines River), Brookfield, Cook County, Illinois (4th congressional district), US, as part of extensive regional flooding in the Chicago area on April 18–19, 2013. Both case report and epic, this hyperlocal work is a post-postmodern (metamodern) baroque exploration of human systems and sense-making as revealed through natural disaster. An update is provided in the author note. Three illustrations accompany this poem.

Keywords: alienation; Chicagoland; climate change; environmental justice; flooding; gerrymandering; housing; land use; natural disaster; poetry; river; suburb

Downstream Effects

Look around. We're all
on a need- to- know basis
Whenever I think of it,
I swing by. Who knows what
she'll say
or do. Today, the creek
is meek, easily cros-
sed in a bound;
the next, roiling; then, skit-
tering
or teeming; still placid,
a nar-
row, svelte s,
dashed on canvas
to sug-
gest calmness,
quietude, a peaceful life

Languid, latent in late sum-
mer, we're both
slow movers
Barely a buggy drainage ditch,
but neon green bal-
room dream for water
striders; drinking
hole for cautious four- leg-
gers who leave
canopy and cover to meet her;
BMX and singletrack style points; a site
for secret plans, strategies;
a tranquil set-
ting for long- delayed talks,
laughter, touch,
kiss, embrace; variety for sidestep-
ping hikers—
a chance to stabilize,
picking through, with walking sticks—
ensuring the bit-
ter smell of sunbaked algae will not
cling mosquito- bite tight and fol-
low. Overhead,
a dragonfly lopes then scoots. Photographers
drop in, take what they need, slice
back through the woods, arrow- eyed,
looking for bonus, might- as-
well shots, snatching them up
like lost coins. You never know
how things
will turn out

Sud-

denly, she pitches in, retel-
ling the old stories
So excited, so relieved,
amid so much
change, to share her long days
of youth, freedom,
unobserved by guidelines, expectations, plans,

protocols, deployments, deadlines— before finance,
 mapmakers, surveyors, builders,
 investors came and went through
 this afterthought town,
 perpetually up- and- coming
 latecomer, after perspective was lost,
 before experience could be pas-
 sed along
 or gained,
 quickly funded, expediently developed in response
 to demand spikes,
 last trainline tract built quickly
 among its neighbors,
 an enclave, an outpost, a fringe
 of renters, starters, and others
 living where we can— discon-
 nected from/
 recon-
 nected to the city in new
 ways, by ger-
 rymander— in a val-
 ley,
 cool, sheltered bot-
 tomland, trap-
 ping ter-
 ritory,
 subdivided into pel-
 letized property, PEZ plots,
 songbird- abundant pass- through land,
 carefully skirted
 in native set-
 tlement maps
 [this poem was composed on land
 native tribes, including the Chippewa, Ottawa,
 and Potawatomi, held in safekeeping until 1816],
 bound by the earlier, wiser, wealthier, higher. Old
 Mother gets big-
 ger, looming
 from within a hud-
 dled, captive audience

Laying paral-
lel all night, I leave
before sunrise, locking
the door behind me. Yet, I arrive
to find myself
trailing behind,
having once again misgues-
sed her moods,
capabilities, having mis-
sed
points of change, cause- effect,
wishing to please the unpleasable
This is not the first time
I have thought I was safe
when I was not
I have thought I was unsafe
when I was safe. I do not know. I
can-
not tell. Although the staff gauge
is regularly repainted, we long ago
abandoned documenting
or began covering
waterline dates—
though with so many recent 100- year storms
we'd have to mark streets
and sidewalks blocks away now, the creek
having so far overtaken, outdistanced
the bridge meant to span and track it
Perhaps we all do have something to forget
or hide
Inside, we wait, reenacting normal,
monitoring private
then shared sentinel sites,
low- lying areas where water gathers
like a tale
coming back to the tel-
ler
through the retel-
ling, memory

being the original trickster
 Each reflective surface presages another

 At night, we can-
 not see
 the broody pud-
 dles expand, the network advance
 We guess, each with our own
 mental gauges, fil-
 ling in accord with the too- near
 tap of rainfall, which sounds dif-
 ferent, calibrated
 individually within each home. No glint,
 no glim-
 mer, no shine in the shadows,
 though the level rises steadily, in unison,
 concealing earth's variability
 with new
 uncertain
 depths

 Morning
 reveals glossy, uniform surfaces in one palette
 where before were limitless textures,
 shapes, colors of our personal interactions
 with habit, space
 Until now, with the water
 in motion, we couldn't see
 how the earth was worn, shaped
 by her hands
 Old Mother's desire paths grow,
 leaving her mark:
 a fur-
 row between yards,
 an imprint snaking
 beneath fence lines,
 slip-
 ping into garages
 and under siding, waterfal-
 ling over

Unsure who is more out of place, we
 eye one other
 on the perpendicular

Out of bounds. The water is out
 of bounds. The creek jumps
 the bank. Those closest begin moving things
 (Just in case) to higher shelves, rol-
 ling rugs,

carefully set-
 ting valuables on the steps up, warning
 others to be careful, laughing, reas-
 suring
 themselves against paranoia, trying not to alarm
 those who are not alarmed,
 considering whether more should be done,
 not wanting panic

to invite destruction,
 left alone
 with self-recrimination
 and the renewed resolutions
 of someone who

knows bet-
 ter— having eliminated then allowed
 wood, textiles, paper, electronics
 in this place that is ours but not ours, or
 ours but only temporarily, or
 ours on loan,
 during dry weeks only

We do what we can, put-
 ting roots
 down to stretch out wherever pos-
 sible
 for this short life, dig-
 ging in, holding
 on with money from tomor-
 row's pockets [as
 determined by underwriters]. Abruptly, we attune
 to the sadness
 of those who slept

asking/ not asking
 for all the coat
 and purse chairs. Everyone makes way,
 moving aside or leaving, maybe grudgingly, maybe
 with more options or bet-
 ter plans anyway
 Some can or must adapt,
 match and embrace the spirit,
 staying on

The rain slows
 or even stops. The sun peeks in. The dog
 always needs walking. One man goes out
 for his Bet-
 ter- be- double- bag-
 ged
 newspaper. Another
 opens a beer. A young couple wanders
 their now clean deck barefoot, wine glas-
 ses in hand,
 deciding whether/ when to open a fresh bot-
 tle
 An older couple sends the kids
 to the store. Others roam to expand
 the information radius
 by foot and by pad-
 dle or oar
 Tilted and tucked away for just this day,
 leaf- covered watercraft
 whisk out, push off, and glide
 from all directions

This is before explosive violence,
 external concus-
 sion and a disar-
 ray
 that descends stairs before ascending them,
 switching back, like a rid-
 dle, a prank,

a practical joke, while also
locating new internal
stairwells to climb—strad-
dling both,
a mir-
ror- image dance, a race to the top
at matched pace, a sloshy visual echo

A mute effortles-
sness cuts off
the household's rut-
ted traf-
fic pat-
terns, severing
daily bookend routes. An insubstantial
substantiality fills the space, speaking quickly,
clearly to the body,
in no uncertain terms, with stop-
ping force:
Get out. You don't belong here
Old Mother has the floor
Doors blow off hinges, sending knob and lockset
to the opposite wall, revealing the futility
of locks and doors. The water
relocates to separate
rooms the washer
and dryer; the legs on the wash
basin
splay in the heave and tus-
sle

Once inside, Old Mother does
not restrain curiosity—and sometimes
just likes
to stir the pot. Precisely, gently,
she will turn objects stored
in corners by 90 degrees, swal-
lowing
one shoe whole but toy-boating another
Guiding from beneath a box

through a wob-
ble to a slow bob,
as if reading contents before consumption
or instructions before use,
she mindles-
sly replaces it
on the same shelf, perhaps in favor
of a healthier or faster option. Nah,
she says
Don't need that

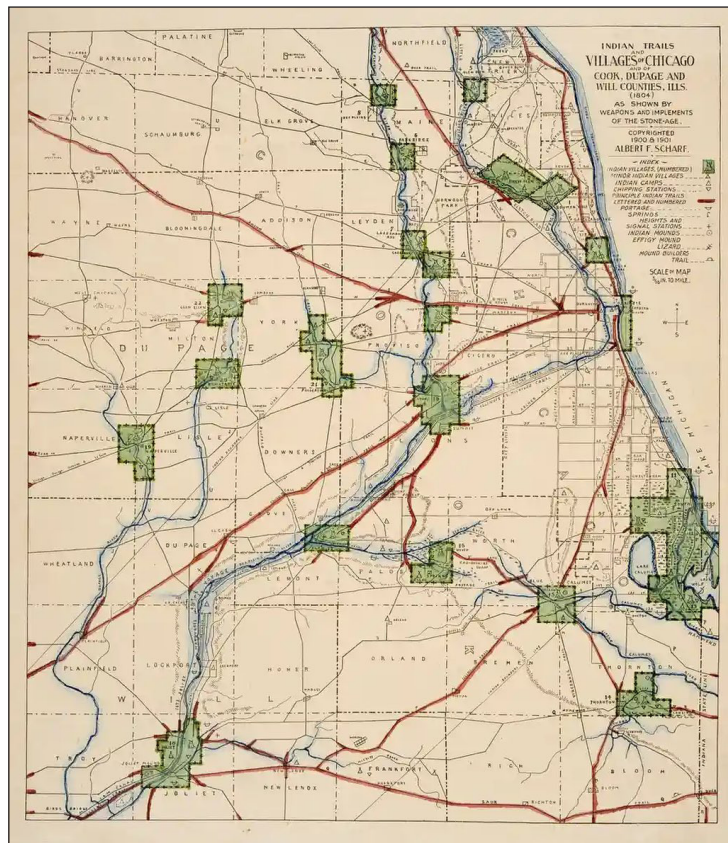
The rain returns.
 thoughts,
 on a changing situation
Rising floodwater is quiet,
 during a change of direction
 or an expansion,
a former position
 after a long time away
 In a house,
 water folding it's like
 and unfolding, shaking
it off, shaking it out,
 just starting over
and refolding for a trim-
mer fit in a reorganized area. It curls
It crimps. Then,
starting slow
 and ending slowly
while a frog and cricket sing

After the river has receded,
after the stream recedes,
amid the skidding, stained withdrawal
of slow, spore-saturated silt,
along the sludgy, belched-up
banks appear things
the creek has taken and combined
with things tossed in
on another day or decade,
items discarded guiltily, accidentally lost,
perhaps taken by surprise

in spring sunshine— in addition
 to objects that must
 have required an accomplice, surely
 a two- person job
 Although, if pres-
 sed,
 Old Mother, who denies nothing
 and makes no promises, may just
 find her
 way around to admit-
 ting, nearly brag-
 ging,
 that she did it all herself! She sure
 could use a nice bench, a six- pack,
 a flowerpot— and why not take up
 smoking again at this point?
 What are you gonna do about it?
 Go on. Although she may break you if she can,
 can't help but love her,
 but don't expect her
 to thank you for it



March 15, 2016: Brookfield (IL, US) Canoe Launch, Salt Creek Water Trails.



Scharf, A. F. (1900). *Indian Trails and Villages of Chicago and of Cook, DuPage and Will Counties, Ills. (1804): As Shown by Weapons and Implements of the Stone Age*. https://news.wttw.com/sites/default/files/article/file-attachments/The_Scharf_Map.pdf. Retrieved August 30, 2022.

Author Notes

The Native American, Anishinaabeg (Nishnaabe, Neshnabé) tribes listed—the Council of Three Fires, representing the Ojibweg (Chippewa), Odawak (Odawa), and Bodéwadmik (Potawatomi)—and the date shown are from Kircher, M. G., ed. *Brookfield, Illinois: A History*,¹ in reference to the Treaty of St Louis (1816), 1 of 14 such treaties signed in the St Louis, Missouri, area.

The riverine flood described occurred on Salt Creek (the Little Des Plaines River), Brookfield, Cook County, IL (4th congressional district), US, as part of extensive regional flooding in the Chicago area on April 18–19, 2013, only a few years after the global financial crisis. Many local households that barely survived the manmade financial systems disaster were ruined by this natural disaster.²

Perhaps surprisingly, the hero of the story in this case was business interests. The insurance companies that carry Federal Emergency Management Agency flood protection policies sued the municipality (along with many others) for illegally storing water in people's homes.³ Although the lawsuit was dropped,⁴ the willingness to act appeared to result in changes to federal flood mapping and improvements to the village's mitigation efforts,⁵ despite inconsistent local cooperation in collaborative data-sharing and planning processes.⁶

Independent of community engagement and, relatedly, accurate property transfer disclosure data,⁷ eventually the land tells us about itself. This poem addresses a personal reckoning of this kind—along with the concept and challenges of ownership amid ongoing displacements⁸ that result from neglectful relationships toward nature and each other within larger, interconnected sets of often non-supportive human systems.

I believe this work will be of interest to others processing a flood experience, of which there are a great many within the United States⁹ and, sadly, elsewhere.¹⁰ It helps people to have our problems, experiences, and observations described when we are left wordless by climate trauma; we feel heard, understood, and better able to reclaim agency,¹¹ regardless of whether we feel or ultimately take the opportunity to join one another to 'rework ourselves' within a fuller understanding of place and human community.¹²

Notes

¹ Brookfield, IL: Brookfield History Book Committee, 1994.

² Uphues, B. (2013). One for the record books. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. April 23, 2013. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2013/04/23/one-for-the-record-books>. Retrieved August 30, 2022; Uphues, B. (2013). Brookfield offers help for flood control. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. June 11, 2013. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2013/06/11/brookfield-offers-help-for-flood-control>. Retrieved September 12, 2022; Uphues, B. (2014). Brookfield's new building boom. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. January 28, 2014. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2014/01/28/brookfields-new-building-boom>. Retrieved August 30, 2022.

³ Ziezulewicz, G. (2014). Insurance co. sues Will County, 12 towns over flood damage. *Chicago Tribune*. April 29, 2014. Available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/ct-xpm-2014-04-29-ct-flooding-lawsuit-bolingbrook-plainfield-tl-0501-20140429-story.html>. Retrieved August 31, 2022; Uphues, B. (2014). Insurance firm wants to recoup flood payouts. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. April 29, 2014. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2014/04/29/insurance-firm-wants-to-recoup-flood-payouts>. Retrieved August 31, 2022.

⁴ Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia Law School. (2014). Illinois Farmers Insurance Co. v. Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago. U.S. Climate Change Litigation database. Available at: <http://climatecasechart.com/case/illinois-farmers-insurance-co-v-metropolitan-water-reclamation-district-of-greater-chicago>. Retrieved August 30, 2022.

⁵ Uphues, B. (201). Brookfield pump station a go for 2016. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. February 2, 2016. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2016/02/02/brookfield-pump-station-a-go-for-2016>. Retrieved August 30, 2022; Uphues, B. (2021). Streets, basements flood after June 26

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- ⁶ Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2014). 3.3.19 Brookfield, Village of Summary (CID 170066). In *Flood Risk Report Des Plaines River Watershed, 07120004* (pp. 88–90). Available at: https://map1.msc.fema.gov/data/FRP/FRR_07120004_20150115.pdf?LOC=3219173ee3df4b922844accfe8904d3d. Retrieved August 30, 2022; Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. (2018). *Lower Salt Creek Watershed-based Plan*. Available at: https://www2.illinois.gov/epa/topics/water-quality/watershed-management/watershed-based-planning/Documents/LowerSaltCrk_WatshdPlan_Dec2018_FINAL.pdf. Retrieved September 12, 2022; Cook County Department of Emergency Management and Regional Security. (2019). *Cook County Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan*. Vol 2: *Municipal Annexes: Brookfield Annex*. Available at: <https://cookcountyemergencymanagement.org/sites/default/files/images/Brookfield%20Annex%202019.pdf>. Retrieved September 12, 2022.
- ⁷ Hersher, R. (2020). Living in harm's way: why most flood risk is not disclosed. *All Things Considered*; National Public Radio. October 20, 2020. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/20/921132721/living-in-harms-way-why-most-flood-risk-is-not-disclosed>. Retrieved September 13, 2022; Frank, T. (2021). Home sales need better disclosure of flood risk, experts say. *Scientific American*. February 2, 2021. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/home-sales-need-better-disclosure-of-flood-risk-experts-say>. Retrieved September 13, 2022; Natural Resources Defense Council. (2022). How states stack up on flood disclosure. Available at: <https://www.nrdc.org/flood-disclosure-map>. Retrieved September 13, 2022; Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2022). *Flood Risk Disclosure: Model State Requirements for Disclosing Flood Risk during Real Estate Transactions*. Available at: https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_state-flood-risk-disclosure-best-practices_07142022.pdf. Retrieved September 13, 2022.
- ⁸ See note 2.
- ⁹ U.S. Geological Survey. (2022). Water resources of the United States: project alert postings. Available at: <https://water.usgs.gov/alerts/index.html>. Retrieved August 30, 2022.
- ¹⁰ FloodList. Floods and flooding. Oderbruch, Germany, European Union. Available at: <https://flood-list.com>. Retrieved August 30, 2022.
- ¹¹ Illingworth, S. (2020). 'This Bookmark Gauges the Depths of the Human': How Poetry Can Help to Personalise Climate Change. *Geoscience Communication*, 3: 35–47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5194/gc-3-35-2020>. Retrieved August 30, 2022; Bentz, J. (2020). Learning about Climate Change in, with and through Art. *Climatic Change*, 162: 1595–1612. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-02804-4>. Retrieved August 30, 2022; Carroll, R. (2005). Finding the Words to Say It: The Healing Power of Poetry. *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2(2): 161–172. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ecam/neh096>. Retrieved September 1, 2022; Sima, R. (n.d.). More than words: why poetry is good for our health. International Arts + Mind Lab. Available at: <https://www.artsandmindlab.org/more-than-words-why-poetry-is-good-for-our-health>. Retrieved September 1, 2022; Srivastava, M. (2021). Can poetry heal collective trauma? *Thesacredwell* (blog). August 25, 2021. Available at: <https://sacredwell.in/2021/08/25/can-poetry-heal-collective-trauma>. Retrieved September 1, 2022; Ataga, J., & McNiece, Z. (n.d.). Poetic meaning-making: a new path to trauma work. *NBCC Visions*. Available at: <https://www.nbcc.org/resources/nccs/newsletter/poetic-meaning-making>. Retrieved September 1, 2022; Sax, A. (2019). Understanding trauma: the healing process of poetry. *Kingsley & Kate Tufts Poetry* (blog). March 5, 2019. Available at: <https://arts.cgu.edu/tufts-poetry-awards/understanding-trauma-the-healing-process-of-poetry>. Retrieved September 1, 2022.
- ¹² Plumwood, V. (2007). A review of Deborah Bird Rose's 'Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation.' *Australian Humanities Review*. <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2007/08/01/a-review-of-deborah-bird-roses-reports-from-a-wild-country-ethics-for-decolonisation>. Retrieved August 30, 2022.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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