

RIVERBEND ANTHOLOGY

By Douglas Wood

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RIVERBEND, IL (Est. 1823)

Beneath its iron-solid surface the ancient river rolls along relentlessly gulf-bound until midway it wanders, first east, and then northeast, before hooking unexpectedly west past a miles-long limestone bluff whose face it once carved—a continuous ridge capped with frozen elms, their bare limbs, crissing, crossing. A few withered leaves cling, shuddering in the biting wind. Along the ice-jammed bank the golden eyes of wintering eagles spy on rats and careless hares while safe under glass, the silvery fish sleep deep, currently hidden from hungry beaks.

Poised on the high side—looking down on downtown St. Louis, but too polite to say so—is that good city founded by Jolliet and Père Marquette, whose bronze gazes are cast, frozen, upon a benchless park between the dental college and the Pie Town Diner. Up and down these scraped, salted streets, fishtailing cars make for offices in the gateway city. Ruddy, bulky children skid and climb aboard a frosty bus, puffing, stamping their boots, hoisting back-

breaking packs to be dumped in lockers filled with folded notes, photos, and fragrant gym clothes. A blameless gray day in the morning in Riverbend, Illinois.

What is your emergency?

Hurry! This is Jolliet Elementary.

Stay on the line, ma'am. The police are coming.

He's going room to room . . .

Eighteen minutes, from first shot to last. Beginning to end.

A ribbon runs. *Breaking* . . . Huddled in front of their streaming screens, townsfolk watch and instead of seeing some unfortunate other, they disconcertedly see themselves. The shot hovers over the familiar gymnasium, the cafeteria, the library with a bank of windows they drive past daily. Chains of children follow like ants across a frigid blacktop, past toy squad cars. Lilliputian officers use brightly colored ribbon to wrap the terrible present. Death tarps alive with wind.

Breaking . . . Lights. Microphones shoved in naked faces. Most everyone in town knows someone affected. Parents accuse, call for fewer guns or more, point fingers, chase rumors. This doesn't happen here, they say. They ask, Why, why, why, why? No one knows, though anchors employ their thesaurical gymnastics to avoid stepping on toes: Eighteen souls 'taken too soon,' 'passed on,' 'lost their lives,' 'met their end,' 'crossed over.' The lucky are now called—will forever be called—survivors instead of children.

Snow dusts a thousand marchers' candle-lit faces, blankets a mountain of stuffed animals accumulated in the days after. Some citizen plants eighteen hillside angels for the new recruits in the celestial choir. In phone trees, prayer warriors call upon the Prince of Peace. Never do they whisper the d-word, not even alone on their pillow in the blackest hours. Others in Riverbend, those of a different bent learn to say the word, dead. My child is dead. Our children are dead. Not taken. Not lost like a library book left in the cafeteria. Dead.

Eighteen times the bell in the square tolls at 11:16. The gathered assemblage stands gravely. The governor himself speaks the names. As for the murdered teachers and staff, he pronounces them fallen heroes and commissions a plaque to be hung in Springfield. He expresses the undying gratitude of the community, the nation, for their sacrifice. Eighteen lives cut tragically short. Thoughts, prayers.

But what of the other two, the other casualties—the shooter who ate a bullet? the mother of the beast? The never-mentioned, never-forgotten? At the sound of these un-hallowed names folks' jaws set. Eighteen dead, they say. Eighteen. As if these two might cancel the rest. No, there will be no plaques nor mathematical compromises for that damaged man and his gray-faced mother. Not while the town's wound is gaping and needs draining. Scant few believe in closure any more, not in Riverbend. Never again, they say again.

MEREDITH LINDFORS

- ✓ send J's death cert. to insurance. Again
- ✓ Father R.? Tip priest for funeral? Customary? Ask Mom
- ✓ return casserole dish to neighbors (Eleanor and ????)
- ✓ Thank you note—Andrea and Justin (ham)
- ✓ Thank you note—Work (ham)

Who sent the Harry & David? Find out. Thank (ham)

Thank you note—Mark's work. HE CAN DO THIS. DR. SOLOTT SAYS I

SHOULDN'T HAVE TO DO EVERYTHING (ham)

Lawyer—See who Kathy/Bob Biondi and Marie/Neil Brandt got

Miss Cindy's Tap and Ballet. Refund?

Pay funeral home bill. Late!!! Do this!! Half on Master Card?

Headstone. Mark can do this. HE CAN DO SOMETHING . . .

Go into Johanna's room

Box clothes

Goodwill? Women's Shelter?

BRANDI LEONARD

I got hired as head esthetician at the Manic Cure Beauty Salon down at Riverbend Mall. The owner, Sharla? She did all the facials because she couldn't do nails for shit, so I did them: tips, acrylics, silk wraps, nail art, hard gels, sea salt manicures, paraffin. Pedicures, too.

Thursdays at three thirty, rain or shine, in came Connie. Brandi, she'd say, My kids are studying constellations— you got any stars in you today? And I'd give her rhinestones like Orion or the Big Dipper. Oh, we painted on flags, butterflies, daisies... Eight Christmas trees with menorah thumbs. Next day, she'd go back in and say, Class, would you look at what that silly Brandi did to my nails this time? Third grade. What's that, seven? Eight? Once in a while, some skinny little thing would come by, poking her button nose in the salon, her eyes wide and she'd go, Are you the for-real Brandi? Up at Joliet Elementary I was about as famous as Connie Colegrove's crazy nails were.

So that Thursday Connie comes in with a pretty good cough, and I ask if she wants to cancel. Next week is Valentine's, she says. Those kids'll give me no end of grief if I don't go in tomorrow with something to show. So I did her nails up. The next day was . . . So, yeah.

When they were fixing to bury her, Connie's husband called the shop. He said Connie wouldn't have wanted anyone but Brandi to touch her up. And he was right. I made sure Connie Colegrove went into the ground with those ten perfect, painted-on hearts she got before, to teach her kids what love means.

MAURA DAVIS-GUTIERREZ

I think most of you folks know me, but for those who don't, I'm Dr. Maura Gutierrez. I've been an educator for sixteen years and the principal at Joliet Elementary for nine. As long as I've been here my first priority, the first priority of my staff, has always been the safety of the children. So let's look at the facts:

On February 13th, Joliet Elementary had four hundred twenty-nine students present, and forty-one teachers and staff. At approximately 9:40 AM, an armed intruder broke through a security door. Shots were reported in the art room and I spoke our code word over the loudspeaker. The school went into lockdown at 9:48 AM.

Art teacher Hannah Schmidt was setting up her classroom when she was shot three times. Hannah leaves behind a child with a disability. Second grade teacher Connie Colegrove was shot at point blank range. She'd been teaching at Joliet since before I became principal. She leaves behind a husband, three children, and one grandchild. Instructional Specialist Felix Calderone laid down his life shepherding kids into nearby classrooms. Felix leaves behind his husband Ken, who is a teacher at Riverbend High, and two beautiful little girls. Maintenance staff Donna Siddons quite literally kept our school running. She knew most of the kids' names and they all knew hers. She died hiding two children in the girls' bathroom. She saved those two girls' lives. Now, it seems she did indeed prop open an exterior door, but the evidence suggests the killer entered at the north entrance, by the gym, not the west entrance. If she made a mistake, it was an honest one.

As has been widely reported I was locked in my office, because that is where I happened to be at 9:48 AM. Protocol is: Barricade where you are, attend to the children near you, and wait for rescue. We practice this. We drill for it. And I followed the protocol.

Next I want to confirm that yes, there was one child killed because their teacher locked him out of their room—but that's the protocol. It is district-wide protocol for all teachers in lockdown. When you picture your child, any child, locked out of the room in an intruder situation, it's horrible. But if your child were one of the ones kept safely locked inside, would you want the teacher to open the door? How many more would have died if Adam Kearns had pushed his way into one more classroom?

Adam Kearns broke into our school through an alarmed door that was malfunctioning and scheduled to be fixed. In other words he got lucky. After that, our system worked. Fourteen kids and four adults? The horrible fact is, it could have been much worse . . .

After the meeting, which I admit I could have handled better, the school district offered me my retirement. I took it. These days, I work part time at the hotel that my husband and I own, down on the riverfront, half a mile from where a pair of eagles come to nest every winter.

JIM THEIS

Today, yesterday, every day since I got the call and walked into Joliet Elementary, I've been dislodged from my body. Specifically, I am above and a little bit to the right. It's a matter of inches. Beneath me, my body nods and walks and says things. Drives over to my mother-in-law's to pick up the boys and the dog. My body takes me for a ride around my house, carries me from room to room at night to check on all the things. Doors bolted. The gas stove turned off. The knives put in their drawer where they won't hurt anyone. My gun. My boys go to St. Elizabeth's. They weren't there. They didn't see it.

After the commendation ceremony, my sergeant said to take my time coming back, but a week later, she's calling, wondering where I am.

Even as I hear myself reminding my boys to eat something, my body remembers to eat. My body tells my wife I'm fine. I give it permission to sleep with her when she comes begging.

Always just above and to the right. Never, not even when I am alone, do I slip back inside my husk. Not when Shannon has an affair with the church youth minister. Not when our divorce comes through, or my parents die one after the other, like items checked off. Not when I retire, or Teddy graduates from Northwestern, or Joe marries too young and has a daughter of his own, and she's nine years old and in third grade. Even in those infinite minutes between when school lets out and she unlocks my front door, I hover forever separate. I rearrange my grandpa face, set her on her math homework.

As my body dries and slumps, I float above, to the right, praying for the day I'll hear that snap and whatever tether binds me to this heavy flesh will release and let me drift.

ROBERT BIONDI

Boys and guns. Guns and boys. When Tyler was two, three, Kathy and I made a big stink because somebody in our playgroup had the gall to give squirt guns in the goody bag. We were like, *Squirt guns? At a cowboy birthday? How dare they!* Tyler was our first, our only. What did we know?

Naturally by kindergarten he was obsessed with them—cowboys, policemen, soldiers . . . Like Talmudic scholars we had to resolve: Is a ray gun a gun? When does a carrot become a Colt? How do we keep Tyler from his most reliable weapon, his finger? Tyler, our sweet, huggable bear.

Finally, age seven or so, we decreed, Pretend gunplay would be allowed as long as he did not pretend to shoot people. Translation? We caved. And it worked great for about a week, then he was shooting us more than ever. One day, I got this idea.

He says: Bang, bang. I got you Daddy!

I say: Hey buddy, I know you'd never ever hurt somebody, not even for pretend. So you must have been shooting . . . *A Kiss Gun!* I go chasing, smooching after him and Tyler runs like anything, giggling and screaming, till I scoop him up and smother his ticklish neck with kisses.

Kiss Gun really worked. Household violence went way down. Even years later he'd come peeking from behind the sofa. *Daddy, I've got a Kiss Gun . . .* Tyler was ten.

NANCY KEARNS

He slipped out of me, steamy with life, my tiny bundle of dreams and I spilled my hopes over his peachy, soft head. Baptizing him with kisses into the family of the world like he was the first child and I the first mother. My boy, my boy, my beautiful boy. My Adam.

The paradise days before the fall were few. His moods. His inward gaze. Preschool teachers, and then pediatricians downplayed his rages. At first, anyway. But all along, I knew. Diagnosis after diagnosis, I knew. I searched for a path through his labyrinth, found a few where he and I could meet. Secret passages though, lay deeper still, beyond a mother's sight. Blacker. Rank. Chill.

And he grew. This looming man twice my size, my son, my life.

I made my bed and climbed inside. February tormented the windows, seeped through the plastic wrap along with the faint morning. Nested beneath a comforter and an afghan crocheted by a favorite aunt, I dreamed of not much, warmth perhaps, having shrouded myself in flannel and his faded athletic socks. The radiator spat and clanked in the pinkening darkness. I did not stir when the door clicked and the room was splattered with lightning.

As I lay cooling, he stood wordless, his mouth working.

Did you think it kind, Adam, to spare me your second act? Those children still round with baby fat, laid out in red rows. To spare me from the parents, our friends, our neighbors, driven mad. Their shouted questions: Did you love him, Nancy, your malignant son? Yes or no. Either answer doomed.

If you'd only let me live, I would have answered them. I would have looked into their shuttered eyes and told them I'd have given anything to stop you, but I loved you to there and back again. Despite it all. You were my son and deserving of love. I would have said it until someone heard.

Here, beyond life, I watch the arcs of those diamond-bright souls sent to rest with me. Does Adam shine among them? No, I think not. I sleep, clutching my stillborn grief, dead before I could give it birth. Nancy Kearns, Mother of Sorrows. Earth to earth.

DONNA SIDDONS

The old stomach flu had got hold of me again that morning. I nearly called in but I'd already used up most of my sick days. So I come in, but I'm not moving too fast, let's just say. Took my time mopping the snow slush from the hall, then I dump out my water outside and prop the door with my bucket, so the floor'd dry before one of them kids slip and fall. Afterwards, I grab paper towels and TP of my closet along with my roller trashcan and I head off to do the kids' washrooms. Just as I'm wheeling up to the door of the Girls', I see him down by the gym, all dressed in black with a couple of them miniature machine guns or whatever. He's big with a beard, fat, shooting out the fluorescents one by one, like pop . . . pop . . . pop . . . I can't believe he's real till he turns and goes busting into Mrs. Colegrove's third grade room. Two little girls are behind me—Andrea and Libby, it was—and I grab 'em by the arms and real quick we duck in the john and I lock it behind us. It's gonna be okay, I say to them. The girls, their eyes was big as plates. We hear some screams and some guns for a time. And then there wasn't nothing.

We set in there, the three of us, for a long while and I've got half a mind to sneak away, to get some help. On the way, I could even get in my big roller can. But I can't leave the girls. Tiny things, they was. They start whispering, like girls do, but I keep thinking about my trashcan out in the hall and how maybe I could pop out and grab it. Or at least grab what I keep inside. It isn't that I needed a drink, but when the police come, everybody's going to know—alla my kids would know—about the bottle I keep in a plastic Walgreen's bag there. The girls and me, we don't hear anything for a few minutes. And I stand up, ready to just pop out and grab that bag. That's when we hear mirrors shatter next door in the boys' washroom.

The door handle sort of jostles. I tell the girls to stand on the toilets and be brave, to not make any noise. Next comes kicks and splinters and a couple of blasts like cherry bombs but it must have been gunshots. I'm under the sink when the door gives way and he busts in, three guns on him and a thick vest like in the movies. I thought he had on one of them Halloween masks at first, the clear ones, but no. His face was just that blank.

One of the girls lets out a little peep and I seen his eyes swoop over. Something in me changes right then and I stand up and come barreling straight for him. He swings one of his guns toward me and he shoots one, two, three times, but I keep running. The top of my head goes numb; I can't see, I'm probably dead by this point, but my body keeps moving and crashes into him. Big as he was, he goes down with me, cracks his head good on the tile. I'm laying there in my own gore, red spreading over my clean floor. As I start rising above, I seen him get up and back out of the girls' bathroom and go off somewhere else.

Where I am, I can hear folks around town talking. Blaming me for propping the door open, even if that's not how that monster got in. Blaming me for the bottle they found but could never prove was mine. But I can rest. One of them little girls with me was hurt pretty bad, but they both come out alive. I done my job.

DAVID PARTINGTON-DOWNS

This is what I have become.

I told a grieving father, “Your child’s story should be told. Clarissa was more than victim number seven. She had a name, she had birthday parties and decorated her room with boy-band posters. She played soccer, I hear. What position?”

I told a mother, “Your son Flynn’s story should be told. Has he shared with you what he witnessed in Mrs. Colegrove’s room? Does he have nightmares?”

I said, “Your wife’s story should be told. Some news outlets are reporting that Donna propped open the security door that let alleged killer Adam Kearns in. I know it’s a difficult time, but what would your wife say to her critics right now, if she were alive?”

“These flowers are for you. I don’t mean to intrude at such a terrible time, and in the hospital no less. But I wanted to know how your daughter, Libby, is feeling now? Thank god. You must be relieved. I’m sure the last thing you want to do is talk to a reporter; I probably wouldn’t either. Ha-ha. But if I could speak with her, for just a few minutes, maybe it could save future lives, who knows? Her story should be told.”

“Officer Theis, some people are calling you a hero. What went through your mind, walking into that school, unsure whether the killer was alive or dead? Tell us your story, officer. Do you go by Jim? James?”

“Dr. Gutierrez! Where did your school’s policies fail the children? Do you feel personally responsible? Dr. Gutierrez! Dr. Gutierrez!”

The school secretary who'd made the 9-1-1 call wasn't talking. Not yet. There were twelve different outlets camped across from her house, knocking on her front door. Each of us hoped we'd be the one who'd be there when she cracked and her grief spilled out.

And after I get her quote—because it's me she speaks to—I call my editor to tell him how I heard the she was diabetic, so I brought her a box of chocolates. She ate them right up and told me everything. He thinks it's funny until I tell him that I quit.

I can't do this any more. He says how important it is for someone to document this history, to bear witness. He says I'm reminding people how connected we are, forcing them to empathize. He promises a vacation that will probably never materialize. Promises to submit me for prizes. My editor wants something from me, but I choose to forget that. It's what I do.

I order room service, swallow about four Advils with four scotches. Take a hot shower to warm my frigid blood. Only then can I Skype with my kids and wife, like I'm human.

After, lying on the synthetic bedspread, I write what I always write. I could cut and paste it by now—

A heroic secretary . . . a ray of hope amid the darkness of tragedy . . . more questions than answers . . . a killer, dead by his own hand at the scene . . . vows of congressional action . . . outraged activists on both sides . . . a candlelight vigil . . . three small coffins . . . a private ceremony . . . a family shattered . . . one child's story . . . shock that this could happen here . . . a community mourns . . .

I write it stupidly hoping this time it might change something. That is how I live with myself.

JENN HILYARD

On this day, because of evil, *Your child will go into the ground for good.*
And if I should collapse? *Someone will catch your elbow.*
And if I should fall faint? *Someone will bring a cool cloth.*
If I should scream like a Canada wind? *Someone will quiet you.*
If I should claw at my face? *Someone will stop your hand.*
If I should stand, unable to lift stone feet? *Someone will urge you forward.*

On this day, because of evil, *Your child will go into the ground for good.*
This day will break. *A mother's lips ground to ashes.*
This day will break. *A mother's arms crushed to dust.*
This day alone, *the last of its kind,*
Someone will be near. *Someone will sweep you up.*

LEOLA CALHOON

Not everybody likes my babies, I know that. Well sure I do. I send 'em anyhow whenever situations happen. For a grieving parent, (well, for some) a life-like replica, hand-made, it ain't like hugging on the real thing, but it gives 'em something they can hold and cry on. For some folks I hear, the dolls, they help.

I find their pictures in the paper or my nephew prints them off his new computer. You start with a baseball-sized tin foil ball, add the clay to make the head and rough it in. Next you carve it. Add the paint in layers. Making all the faces, that's my special gift. The spitting image, one and all. The bodies are premade out of cloth and Virgil makes the clothes, can you believe it? Capturing the spirit of the child, now, that's the art. Paying for it is the tricky part.

I gotta pay for paints and paperclay, for polyfill and costumes. Pay for packing and the postage from Kentucky up to Riverbend. Sending fourteen dolls, you know, it starts to add up. And at my age, what with all my medical expenses? Me and all the dogs, we live off Virgil's Social, but still, I couldn't ask for money. Not from them. That was never why I done it, that's for darned sure! I'm kind like those Riverbend parents, hoping that no matter where their baby has gone to, someone is there to hold it.

Katherine Biondi sent hers back, but Jenn Hilyard sent me a real nice note.

LIBBY BRANDT

My silver chair motors along the sidewalk past the new school, built on the site of the old school where my legs were stolen. Taken from me when I was a child, like two lollypops. Taken from me along with summers at the lake and ballet classes. Taken, like my family's savings, my parents' marriage.

My first kiss.

The cheerleading squad.

My high school boyfriend.

Pledging Tri-Delt. Spring break in Daytona.

On the beach, some guy from Virginia, that first drunken tumble.

An apartment in St. Charles with a girlfriend from work. A husband in construction.

Children—we would have had three and when I got my week off from the dentist's office, we would have traveled all of us to the Smoky Mountains, camping. Grandkids to dance with, to climb up in my lap.

Gone.

They told me C-5 quads could work, get married. Some C-5s get pregnant, they said. Their chairs don't define them, they said, way back when.

If it's warm enough on a Sunday, a van carts a bunch of us to the new elementary school. They installed benches there, each with a plaque and a grove of eighteen dogwoods. They call it the Peace Park. I keep waiting for a little bit of peace but I don't think I'll find it there.

Adam Kearns didn't kill me, but he took my life.

BARB DOUGLAS

I kept myself nice, but on account of my size, I didn't date much. Fucking Riverbend. One slow afternoon at the Pie Town diner, I got a wild hair. Sitting in one of my booths was that quiet guy who come in once in a while, big as a bear, with his snout in his World War II books. I figured, why not ask him out? What could it hurt?

We went on a couple dates. And when I say dates, I mean he come over to my place for sex. Didn't even give me his phone number for the longest time. I had to wait till he come in the restaurant to ask did he want to come over Friday night. And he'd go, Okay, like I asked if he needed more coffee.

Five months later I wind up pregnant. Adam took his mom to mass three times a week and wouldn't let me take care of it. So I moved out of my sister's and in with the two of them. Our plan was to save up and once me and Adam got married—after the baby, for the pictures' sake—then him and me'd get our own place. That was my plan, anyhow. Dipshit didn't say anything. Who knows what his plan was?

His mom Nancy and me fought like cats. She said I tricked him, getting pregnant. Said that before me, Adam never had a girlfriend, never even been with a girl, which I coulda guessed. But did he stand up to her? I told him he was forty-three, and a pussy, and it was about time he grew a pair.

The bed in his room was a queen, way too little with both of us being so big. I knew better than to pet or kiss on him when he was awake. When he was asleep, it went double. He'd huff and thrash and kick at me if my foot so much as touched his. One night when I put my hand

on his bare shoulder, he turns over and elbows me in the eye. Next morning, he looks at my shiner, says Sorry and lets on like he did it in his sleep. Nancy didn't say boo about it, neither.

The pregnancy was rough because of my weight. Blood pressure through the roof. Couldn't work no more. But what can you do? It is what it is. After a while you get to feeling like a big old, beaten down dog, with her chain wrapped up around a tree in the yard.

Then one Thursday, he was off squirrel hunting—Lazy-ass didn't have a job, of course — and Nancy comes in. Says she'd give me three thousand cash to leave. I kissed her cheek and was on the bus in two hours. I never talked to him again.

Six weeks to the day, I delivered my beautiful little girl in Paducah. I sent a picture to Nancy's work. She sent a few checks when she could. Adam asked her, but she let on like she didn't know where I went to. Frankly, I was surprised he noticed I left. I don't think he knew he had a daughter. I hope not.

Then nearly four years later I heard on the news about them little kids up in Riverbend and right away I knew it was him that did it. But what can you do? It is what it is.

I cut out some soldier's obituary from the newspaper. Local guy. I tell my little girl, See? Your daddy was a hero. You've got to make something of your life.

GRACE NGUYEN

I saw that man come in with guns,

I wish I told my sister, *Run*.

WALTER NGUYEN

My wife and I sent our two girls to school that day. One returned.

Why one, not the other? Because it was so.

What is proper, to despair or rejoice? Both. Because it is so.

There are no answers for that disturbed man's rage, though we may seek them until we are consumed. I must strive toward compassion.

Peace be upon my neighbors and all who sorrow.

Peace be upon my family, and especially my daughter Grace.

Peace be upon the soul of my daughter Hope Linh Nguyen.

Peace be upon the soul of Adam Kearns.

Peace be upon my soul.

RIVERBEND

The winter sun comes in morsels barely enough to survive on; the pulse of the frozen world is faint. An opossum stirs but does not wake, waiting to become reacquainted with time. But then the days imperceptibly increase; the dark surrenders seconds. And soon an urgent wind carries a thaw. Snowflakes melt, releasing the past they hold in their molecules. The living river churns, vital, clear as paint, and rises up over its banks, nearly flooding the highway before receding. Along the bluffs, redbuds, dogwoods burst into colorful, shameless life even though a coming cold front will likely bring a hard frost. The trees strain toward a sky so blue it's cruel.

We look up and months have passed since a hollow space opened beneath our town. Most of us clawed our way out of the chasm. Less and less often do we mesmerize ourselves by staring down into the pit, having learned to safely circumnavigate the lip and continue on. An unfortunate few, for their own reasons, despite our calls, stay at the bottom, holding their breath, ignoring the march.

One and all, we say, If only . . . We ask ourselves what unexpected prospects would they have brought to the season, those whom we mourn? Their un-lived lives would be so essential, so intrinsic to the landscape that to imagine a Riverbend without them would seem impossible. If only. From that Riverbend to this one is miraculous far.

Here, in this realm—the Riverbend that is—with vision bitterly earned, we watch the earth. We curse and yield to her relentless greening. Another season arrives unbidden and the wintering eagles vacate their grand nests. A heedless sun strikes our faces as, through half-closed eyes, we walk the muddy banks in search of native flowers among the reeds. Beyond our reach, the constant river bends and rushes to the salty sea.