

Down to the River

D. McArthur Brantley

*For
Vicky, John and Drew
I thank them for believing in me, loving me and
loving my poetry and stories*

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“Then the Angel showed me Water-Of-Life River, crystal
bright. It flowed from the Throne of God and the Lamb...”
Revelation 22:1

Foreword

Storytellers are essential persons in any ordered society. They tie the present generation to the past; they open the way to the future; and they teach people acceptable behavior for the present. Raconteurs, shamans, great teachers provide order and connection in life. They are able to present an important insight about living in a creative and compelling way to help people grow.

The Bible is filled with countless stories from Adam and Eve's first experiences in the Garden of Eden to the unforgettable characters that fill the pages of the Old Testament. They are the guides for living that one encounters when the stories are read or told: Abraham, Ruth, Jacob, Joseph, Jeremiah and so many others.

So too, the New Testament celebrates the lives and contributions of men and women of the early Christian movement. Jesus, himself was a master teacher and storyteller. Jesus understood the need for stories to be used to bring his teaching to life for his hearers.

We have many storytellers today who share various messages. Go to any bookstore and you can see who people are looking for a good story that will speak to their personal needs. In last year's biography of Bruce Springsteen the author calls "the Boss," one of the great story tellers of the 20th century. His music is what he experiences with life and not what others tell him about what it means to live in today's world.

This volume shares my poems and writings with you. May the reader get a glimpse of some truth or a view of life that the characters reveal. This is my story.

D. McArthur Brantley

Wonders

Into the Woods

Farther into the woods
Following a shallow creek
Turning and twisting through briars and mud,
But moving on deeper into the woods
As if led by the hand of an explorer
Always pushing on and
Never thinking that my uncharted course
Was unmarked by the unknown friend
That called me into the woods.

Throughout the time of the eastern sun
And never really noticing that its trek
Had long passed its midday position,
Driven legs continue to pull through bogs
And step on fallen branches and logs,
Seeking and believing that the creek
Would soon give its waters to the mouth
Of the river where self-charted dirt roads lead home.

Deer Stalking

Deer stalking
With no talking
And no walking
Just hawking

The woods on a stand.

Gazing in all directions
And waiting with a gun,
Hoping to see the reflections
Of a deer on the run

In the dawning of the day

Cold fingers
Holding hot coffee in one hand;
Hot fingers ready to command
A cold trigger in the other.

In the flash of a given moment.

Leering
Hearing
Deering
Nearing

If only in imagination.

Taking aim
Over and over again
At any game...

And always the same,

No deer prances in the thicket

After a full day, without a buck
But with an appreciation and greater love
Of the things around and above,
I descend and walk to the truck

A better man.

Blackbirds Play in the Cedar Trees

Blackbirds play in the cedar trees,
And white-permed dandelions sway gently in the breeze,
A patch of oaks show off their negligees,
While overhead, the afternoon sun chases
 puff clouds and blue skies
 in a friendly game of hide-and-seek.

All of this springing upon me in the park
Transforms my winterized heart.

An Afternoon Sun

I sit with my back to an afternoon sun
That shines through the recent-barren branches
Of trees on the edge of the wood.

The warmth that I feel from the rays
Almost convinces me to remove the woolen over shirt
And to write these words on the shirt sleeve,
But the breeze that blows is chilling
Enough to persuade me to continue
The covered bath of an early December sun.

Before me are the brown and sparingly yellow leaves
That have fallen to the ground.
There's a slight dampness in the piles of leaves
That tell of the past weekend rains that fell,
Occasionally, lonely leaves fall from the trees
That have served as homes ever since the beginning of
spring.

The shadow of my head
Rises over the table before me
And rests on the leaves.

And, I am reminded
That just as the leaves converge on the ground,
I too shall follow that shadow
I who know not the damp coolness of an autumn bed,
A coolness that a beaming sun makes warm.

And here I sit with my back to an afternoon sun,
that shines.

Down to the River

The pasture needs a'mowing
The garden needs a'hoeing
The grain needs a'sowing
But I, I need to be going

Down to the river.

I hear the river calls
"Take off your overalls;
Leave your mules in their stalls;
Hang their bridles on the walls.

Come down to the river."

Down to the river
Come down to the river.

When Butterflies Find Moisture

When butterflies find moisture
Along the clay road near the creek,
Flocking like yellow and purple
Patchwork quilt squares along the way,
Moving only to find new cool spots
Under the hanging oaks beside the road
On a scorching summer afternoon,

The corn stalks line the unshaded fields
Like boy soldiers marching to early death
In fatigues, now more brown than green.
Many weeks before they could accomplish any
Productive work...The ears are mere nubbins,
Stunted and baked by the fire of the sun.

The usually fruitful land,
In waterless furrows of hot powdery sand
And cracked, stone-like clods,
Lies drenched only in the false hopes of rain.
This April, this May even this June
The sun drank the moisture from the
Field's water reservoir
And the rains came not to replenish
That which was taken.

The sun shines on the just and on the unjust,
They say that too about the fall of the rain
But the injustice of the sun and the unseen rain
Speak only of the drought that has fallen now
On the just and on the unjust alike.

Where is the justice
When the sun takes all the water from the corn
And the rain refuses to fall
While the butterflies flutter from one
Damp spot to the next
Caring not that the sun has freed the field
Of a harvest of corn?

Butterflies are free, and so too the sun and the rain.
The field is free: free of corn.
The corn is free, now, indeed!

Winter, Farewell

When in February
Spring invites itself to come and stay,
Can it be that it has forgotten
That every season has a time
Or is it plain piggish?

Behind what March dawn
Does winter stand in wait
To pounce upon this unannounced guest
To usher it to the door
And fling it to the wind?

But why so?
Must winter not want to warm itself?
Must it not melt in joy of the
Blazing fire that spring paints everywhere?

When in February
Spring invites itself to come and stay,
Why worry, winter
That it should sleep so soon.

Yellow-Bellied Hiccups

Yellow bellied hiccups belch forth
From malcontented scarecrows
Munching straw from their bosoms,
Giving substance and sustenance to
Bloated bellies,
Malnourished by rickets' diet.

When up the hill
The black crows mime
The chewing and grinding songs
Sung by teeth and unsatisfied stomachs
Of starving straw men and women
Who watch straw babies starve in the field.
Corn, forbidden to be touched by anyone
Except the hungry green giant
That clamors through the autumn field,
Harvesting the hardened fruit and
Collecting all the golden hard kernels
And spitting out the chewed up cobs
And diced shucks.

Hungry babies,
See all this and die in the frost and early snow
And carry with them into their frozen graves
The dreams of stewed corn and succotash,
Corn-on-the-Cob and cornbread pone.
Surrounded not by dead stalks and lifeless roots
Little scarecrows cease their work of frightening away crows
And die until spring comes again.

Unrequited dreams?

Take My Hand

Take my hand
And run quickly with me.
For swiftness flows like
White bellied rapids
That explode over jagged
Rocks embedded in
The raging water of the
River.

While the water pulley
Races eagerly around each
Cog that enchains the
Slave that churns
Ever forward to the
Roaring wall of the
Falling abyss.

Suspended in
Liquid motion—gushing
Forth in wild containment
Head over heel, over heel
Over head, side to side
Ever spinning and
Reaching for a new
Water bed. Engulfed
By the mist and the
Spray and finally
Jackknifing into the
Pool—Descending
And ascending once
Again to breathe new
Air and flow again.

Magnolia Majesty

Framed magnolia blossoms grace the wall
Of our entrance way at home.
They tell the proud and gallant message
That dwells in the artist's heart.

The green leaves and white petals
Glisten in the gentle tones
Of Georgia earth.
They sing of life, of birth, of death: Some, only in
brown buds;
While others show forth the first signs
of magnolia white;
The central blossom has opened fully
It majestic petals, exposing the inner core
Which drops its tiny, red-tipped particles
Upon the bed of white, soft and fragrant.

You can smell the South when you see them.
You can see waltzing young women
In flowing gowns at the spring cotillion.
You can hear the orchestra play its music.

You can feel the certainty that these blossoms
Signal a new promise of joy and life
For today, and for tomorrow.

Come, see;
Share this magnolia gift!

Mountain Monuments

Mountains are eternal monuments
to a creator who continues
making the wind to blow on the mountainside.
The rushing of the breeze
whistles against my ears
and plays with my hair
as if each hair were a childhood friend
playing a game of tug of war.

While the britches legs shiver
as if afflicted with palsy
and cooling currents run head on
through the woven threads
to chill the bare skin all over my body...
making cold the inner warmth of the soul
which also stands within me on the mountainside
which is also an eternal monument
to a creator who continues
to breathe into me the breath of life.

Walking in Shirt Sleeves

Walking in shirt sleeves on a busy street
Greeting the friends and the strangers that I meet
Welcoming the smiles,
Gathering the doubts
Sharing the lives of the people who are out.

On the street: messengers, dreamers,
Sick, men exercising weak hearts, schemers,
Tired, crying children; lost, me-starers
Frustrated, shoppers, helpers, no-carers;
Idealistic, beginners, hungry.
Broken, ulcerated workers, angry;
Lonely, drug users, pushers, runaways,
Mad, happy lovers walking in a daze;
Afraid, savers, pick-pockets, policemen
Wishing children, old people forgotten.

On the street, seeking adventure and fame
All with faces but only one with a name.

Never Lost, Never Found

Never lost but never found and never alone.
Befriended by the flowing creek
And tall hanging trees and dense thickets
Of branches and briars and
A constant stream of animal cries
And woodland violets and fragrant shrubs
And a river that drew us all to its banks.

How vast, how wide
How glad to see it in the dusky light.
But sad that I had come to the end
Of a day with an unknown friend
Tempted and almost yielding to return
By the route that I had taken through the day,
I take the charted dirt road
That leads out of the woods
And promise to return another day.

My Neighbor's Crocus

My neighbors crocus are blooming
So purple, so yellow!
And mine are still tightly covered
In the brown paper bag
Stored away in the closet.

My crocus bulbs will not bloom;
They won't look pretty
They are too late to flower this year

Maybe I will take time to plant them this fall
So my yard will flower too.

South Georgia Gnats

South Georgia gnats have a keen sense of knowing
When to arrive at the opening
Of a mouth needing a quick breath of air
Or a chance to spit out chewing tobacco.
No matter if citronella has been rubbed on all exposed skin
Or 6-12 has been sprayed all around the yard,
They know how to time their aerial attack
On a mouth in the act of opening.

I have often wondered if they have
Not planted wire-taps or other electronic bugs
Within a person's body
So that they can have an early warning
Of the opening of the body's hangar door.

Exactly what is it that gnats like
About getting into a person's mouth?
Is the tongue sweet?
Do they enjoy the smell of plaque and tooth decay?
Are they thirsty?
Do they like the warm, dark cavern that they discover
When they are shut inside? Or,
Are they plain pests
And care only to annoy?

When summer comes this year
I'm going to sit under my old water oak
In my front yard and
Swing in my gliding settee
And wait for the gnats to come.
I'm going to ask them all these questions,
And listen.
And fan.

It Was a Quiet Wood

It was a quiet wood
Green and peaceful
Shaded by oak, poplar and chestnut trees,
Inhabited by occasional hunters
And bands of children playing hide-and-seek
Or going on expeditions to uncharted worlds
Within hearing distance of home.

For decades it was the place where dreams were made.
Where memories were born and grew
In the hearts of friends and neighbors
Of town emerging into a city.

The wood
Having escaped the cutting of dirt streets
And rows of houses being built
Stood as a monument to the forest
That had covered the land
During the time of the Cherokee.

If I Were A Bushy-Tailed Squirrel

If I were a bushy-tailed squirrel
And had to climb through trees
Jumping from limb to limb
On my hand and my knees,
And had to go nutting on the cold ground,
And build a house from the leaves that I found,
While listening for the noise of an old barking hound,
I'd probably find time to play too.
Wouldn't you?

I Can See the Wind

I can see the wind.
I see it as a friend who comes to greet me
On the mountain.
It comes as a good friend
I haven't seen in a long time.
It makes sure we renew our acquaintance;
It does not stand off and wait for me to speak first.
It rushes in, even breaks down the door to be with me.
It whistles and talks and even whispers directly into my ear
And tells secrets and shares dreams with me.
And if I open my ears, I can hear it speak.
And if I open my eyes, I see it clearly.

I see it in the sky with the clouds,
Playing hide and seek; or
I see it hard at work pulling cotton apart
As if it were inspecting the fibers for trash;
I see it shepherding unruly sheep.

I can see the wind take the limp cloth
At the top of a flag pole
And like a merchant enticing the eyes of those
Who know the beauty and the value
Of silk and satin in delicate patterns,
It unfurls the material and collects the price required
From buyers who claim it as their own.

I see it giving a ride to a hitch-hiking hawk.
Granting peace and flight to the bird as it soars,
Ascending so high that it becomes a suspended black dot

And then gracefully glides back to earth.

I see it dancing with the trees and even tickling the leaves
and branches.

And by its caresses

It undresses the trees in autumn

And showers the ground with a new robe for the winter
cold.

I see it as it towel-dries my body

After a brisk walk up the mountain.

And at the same time

It showers me with a coolness

Like the water from a cascading mountain stream.

I can see the wind.

Growth

Once a tiny seed
 Glued to a cone,
Then a freed seed
 Flying all alone.
Once a landed seedling
 Nestled in the earth,
Then a pregnant seedling
 Waiting for its birth.

Once a tiny shoot
 Protruding from the ground,
Then a planted shoot
 Rooted in a mound.
Once a tiny sapling
 Reaching out for light,
Then a growing sapling
 Extending up in height.

Once a tiny tree
 Swaying to and fro
Then a mighty tree
 Weathering wind and snow.
Once a tiny seed
 Flying all alone,
Now a might tree
 Mothering a cone.

I Am Glad to Be in the South

I am glad to be in the South,
When spring green is seen
And dogwoods glow with snow
And camellia and azalea
Color the earth with birth.

I am glad to be in the South,

When summer sun is fun
And hot bare feet reach the beach
And biking and hiking
Fill a picnic day with play.

I am glad to be in the South,

When autumn leaves strip the trees
And the forest ground is yellowed and browned
And living and thanksgiving
Find expression and confession

I am glad to be in the South,

When winter's dross is frost
And scenes are evergreens
And cold winds blowing and snowing
(Contrary to the wish of every child) are mild.

I am glad to be in the South.

Struggle

How to Visit a Poem

It is possessing, never possessed
You can never claim it
As your own
 even if you write it
 or memorize it.

You can never take it home
 with you.
It exists beyond experience.
It grants
 visitors' rights
 publication
 copyrights.

It is not conceited; it denies itself to no one.
It encompasses all people...
It cannot be destroyed
Though you burn it or forget it

Like a revelation, a poem
Reveals itself to a poet.

Solitude

Solitude, O Solitude,
Praise be to thee.
You make the mind to quicken.
You make the soul to think.

Solitude, O Solitude,
Praise be to thee.
You make me search for knowledge
You make me love the truth.

Solitude, O Solitude,
Why do you leave me?
Why are you pushed out by yell
 by bell
 by fears
 of hell?

Solitude, O solitude,
Could it be that I left thee?

Eclipse

At mid-day when the earth turned dark
And the sky became an eerie charcoal gray,
Fear ran rampant in the hearts of ordinary folks
Who began the day unsuspecting of what was to happen.
In past experiences,
Explanations ranged from someone's sins causing it
To a certain assurance that the world was coming to an
end.
Rash promises have been made to God and others at such
times
Hoping to set things right while there was time;
Suicides, blindness, bad dreams—even nightmares
Have followed those occasional happenings.

Today, it is a spectacular event...planned and promoted
By television coverage. Parties of celebration have been
Scheduled to experience and record the event.
Dancing in the street, peering into the sky,
Sneaking a peek through peepholes,
Feeling that eerie feeling of non, near nightness
That pervades the earth for the brief moments of
darkness

Potential

Empty vases and flower pots
Stand proudly on the shelf with fading memories
Of earlier arrangements
That florists had made and delivered
One was a youthful spring bouquet.
One, a dozen roses.
Another a pot of poinsettias
The others, with aging memories,
Unable to specify what flower or plant
They held, only know that the flowers were pretty.

Empty vases and flower pots
Stand proudly on the shelf with budding dreams
For the future.
I'll want more flowers.
I'll want more greenery.
I'll want a living plant
That will provide a lasting scenery.

Empty vases and flower pots
Dead, but yet alive!
Filled, with memories and dreams
Aware that though discarded from their duty
They remain potential bearers of beauty.

Coming to the Storehouse

Coming to the storehouse,
Packed with random thoughts and sounds—
Some tucked back so tightly
That they seldom find room to escape.
At the same time
Some so often called forth
That not only are they dog-tired,
But are now considered unimaginative and unwanted.
I stand gazing and digging to strike
The harmonious chorus of perfect
Thought and sound.

Chanting, incanting, stretching into oblivion:
What pictures awakened, and are now aroused?
What memories? What dreams, what unknowns
Do surface and skim like cream at the top of the pitcher
And fly away as other ghostly apparitions
On a hallowed All Saints' Day.

Are they all within the shelter
Of one's own skeletal and body tissue?
Or come they not from the outer wall to
Impregnate the storehouse and
Cause the virgin's womb to grow
And finally house not only a heartbeat,
But a newborn baby that lives on
After the umbilical cord is cut?

Come sound, come thought.
Let us go together
And make the sweet music of birth.

I Have Not Gone to See the Riverbed

I have not gone to see the riverbed
To check the springs; to smooth the spread;
Buy yet I feel that I must go
And tell the people that I will go.

Does it matter what they may think
If I go; or if I sink?
What affair is it to them?
Why would they really care?
Is it just to keep afloat
And know the direction of my boat
That causes them any concern,
And not really any genuine care of me?

Do they care if the current is swift
Or if they rapids send me cascading
Over the fall, or dash my head upon a rock
Or cut my leg upon the dock?
What about me? What about me?

In the midst of the river, do they see me?
In the heat of the summer, in the cool dark
Night are they really aware of the
Things that I fight—inside and out?
Or am I a lone person apart from my work?

Am I divided into pie squares and
Left with the empty aluminum pan
To have for my self?
Is that where I am?

Where is the rest of myself?

Ode to a Stuffed Mannequin

O mannequin, why stand you so pale—
So calm, so life-like but motionless?
What fills your rigid form?
What gives your body its perfection?
What lies behind the plaster and that paint?
Are you but hollow features with no bones to support
you?
What stuff is there within you
That gives you that aura of decay?

What you can do about your existence
Is just the opposite of my condition.
So, why stand I motionless,
Hollow and alone?

My Office

Today's assignments,
Yesterday's newspapers,
Last week's junk mail,
Last month's correspondence files,
And last generations' books:

My office.

Plus,
Garbled heaps of
Trash, including the telephone;
A desk, including my disarrayed thoughts;
A "These are the good old days" poster;
Along with the dreams of
A better day in the morning.

I really don't fit in this room.
Or, am I kidding myself now.
That possibility frightens
The hell out of me.

Modern Department Stores

Synthetic wigs and Paris hats
And imported, plaited front door mats,
Cookbooks, clothes and fishing lures,
And toys and jewelry and more
Create a modern department store.

Gift certificates,
And credit card plates
Personal checks and dollar bills
Please Rich's, Macy's and Marshall Fields,
And all the other giant merchandise floors
That call themselves modern department stores

Crawling escalators
And unattended elevators,
Cash registers and glassed-in counter tops
For candy and nuts and underwear and tools in the
garden shops,
Credit offices, parking lots and data that the computer
stores
Equip the institutions known as modern department
stores

Mannequin dressers and cosmeticians,
Travel agents and trained beauticians,
Druggists, gift-wrappers, the TV repairmen,
Bakers, sales people and the Board chairman,
And the roving night watchman who opens the locked
doors
For shoppers who inhabit modern department stores.

Business Luncheon

Muffled madness
And bursts of gladness;
Constant laughter
Before and after
Every puff of smoke
And drummer's joke,
Trumpeting the success
Of the company's business,
In order to close a deal
While waiting for the meal,
Surrounded at every table by instruments,
Who achieve the concert to business,
Not much unlike the piped melodies
Of the hundred strings' recording.

In the symphony that arises,
It is not the drummer
Who sets the pace,
The drummer eats, and beats the time
Set by the conductor, pretty waitress,
Running from table to table
Bringing food and drinks,
But much more importantly,
Bringing a mood and feeling
Of care and attention
That every performer expects to have.

It is she, and not the food,
And not the drummer,
Who keeps the business growing;
By polishing the brass and giving the score

That brings prosperity to a nation.

When the performance come to a halt,
And the conductor is applauded,
The drummer returns to the office to feed the vault,
That stores the fruits of business luncheons.

Your Look is a Loaded Gun

Your look is a loaded gun: aimed, cocked, fired.
Murder is running rampant in your heart.
Your eyes have covered me with a white sheet;
Neatly have you dug a grave and laid to rest
My mortal remains and my plans for the future.
The red blood that rushes through your veins
Shows on your corduroy neck and shouts
The final amen of the preacher's "dust to dust."

No blood will spill upon the ground.
No ambulance will siren its way to an emergency room.
No "dead on arrival" will be written.
No police report will record the incident.
There will be no newspaper headline to announce the
crime.
No television reporter will add this murder to
His nightly message of who killed whom.

And even I,
Who witnessed my own brutal murder,
Will have nothing to which I can testify.
I can tell no friend or loving wife
That I died in your eyes tonight.

Why did you murder me?
We, are not strangers. For years awe have known each
other.
We have taken for granted our friendship.
Did I kill you one day last week or maybe last year?
Are you returning a judgment upon some crime
I spoke against you?

