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The River in Winter

By Nathalie Sorensen

The Salmon River, Eastern Ontario, -- January

As I have done so many times in the thirty years since this land became our home, this morning I come down to the river to listen. I sit in the deep snow on the bank, gazing at the slow curve of shore where the river meets the line of maples, tall branches grey at this time of year.

The yellow sedge beside me rustles as the wind rises slightly; the falling snow tinkles sharply against my hat. Once I hear a blue jay call nearby, and once, a little further on, a woodpecker hammers a tree. The chickadees have moved to the birdfeeder near the house; their chipping is out of earshot where I sit. The rest of the time what I hear is the sound of silence.

Snow and ice cover the river almost completely now. There are only two small black patches of open water, one downriver from where I sit, and one upriver, just below the beaver dam. Last week when we arrived in bright morning sunshine, the patch below the dam was frozen as was the ice on the dam itself. At about noon, the river broke through and flooded the clear ice below, ripples sparkling in the sunshine. The sound of falling water, the sound of the river in spring, summer and fall, was restored.

This morning, however, all is frozen and silent. Hushed, under the ice and snow, I know the black water flows, its currents and eddies sweep through rocks and weeds. Inexorably, it follows its chosen course toward Lake Ontario. Undercover, it is still on its way.

The Amu Darya River, Karakalpakistan, -- Eternal Winter

The Amu Darya, known in ancient times as the Oxus, was called "the river sea" by the people along its vast length. It was once one of the great rivers of Asia, flowing into the Aral Sea. I know of this river only from what I read.

What I read is "Eternal Winter," by Tom Bissell in Harper's Magazine, April 2002. For 500 years the Karakalpaks have lived as nomads along the Aral Sea, in what is now known as Karakalpakistan, a republic of Uzbekistan. Forty years ago, the Aral Sea was the fourth largest inland body of water in the world, its area larger than Lake Michigan. Starting in the nineteenth century, water was diverted from the Amu Darya to irrigate fields of cotton, a thirsty crop. Shortly after 1960, the Aral Sea began to disappear. When it was on the shore, the city of Moynac was prosperous, producing twelve million tins of fish a year. Moynac now sits eighty miles from what is left of the

Aral Sea. Scientists estimate that by 2010 the sea will be completely gone. "It is," writes Bissell, "a place of almost unimaginable misfortune."

Despite this warning, I try to imagine it as I read: "for years dust storms have been scouring the region with hundreds of millions of tons of salt and sand from the Aral's exposed seabed, much of which is poisonous thanks to tons of Soviet insecticides and toxic waste dumped into the sea over the decades." Two thirds of the Aral Sea basin's people are now considered sick or unwell. Rates of bronchial asthma, lung disease, infant cerebral palsy, cancers of the stomach and throat, urogenital and endocrine disease among the Karakalpaks are abnormally high and getting higher. Of the 178 species of animal life that have historically lived in the Aral Sea, only thirty- eight now survive, and the thick desert forests, unique to the sea's distinctive ecosystem have all but vanished.

The Amu Darya has dried up. Now not a single drop of what was once called the river sea reaches the Aral. "An entire ecosystem has expired in a single generation."

I am numb. Fear and grief, guilt and rage congeal in me like ice. It would be a relief to explode in hot anger, assign blame, seek justice and retribution. But this death, of a river, of a sea, of a whole region is not like other deaths in our long history of greed and folly. We have no language, no traditions to mourn this loss. When what we kill is the earth itself we have no rituals for repentance and atonement.

The Salmon River, -- February

I go down again to the river, still frozen solid and covered in still more snow. The sedge is silent now, but the chickadees are nearby, their calls soft and bright in the woods on the bank where I sit.

I listen. I see in my mind the water flowing deep under the ice, the rocks and weeds sheltering small bass in the cold. Under the mud, bull frogs are waiting for spring. In the circumstances all I can manage is a small human word. "Forgive," I whisper into the huge white silence.