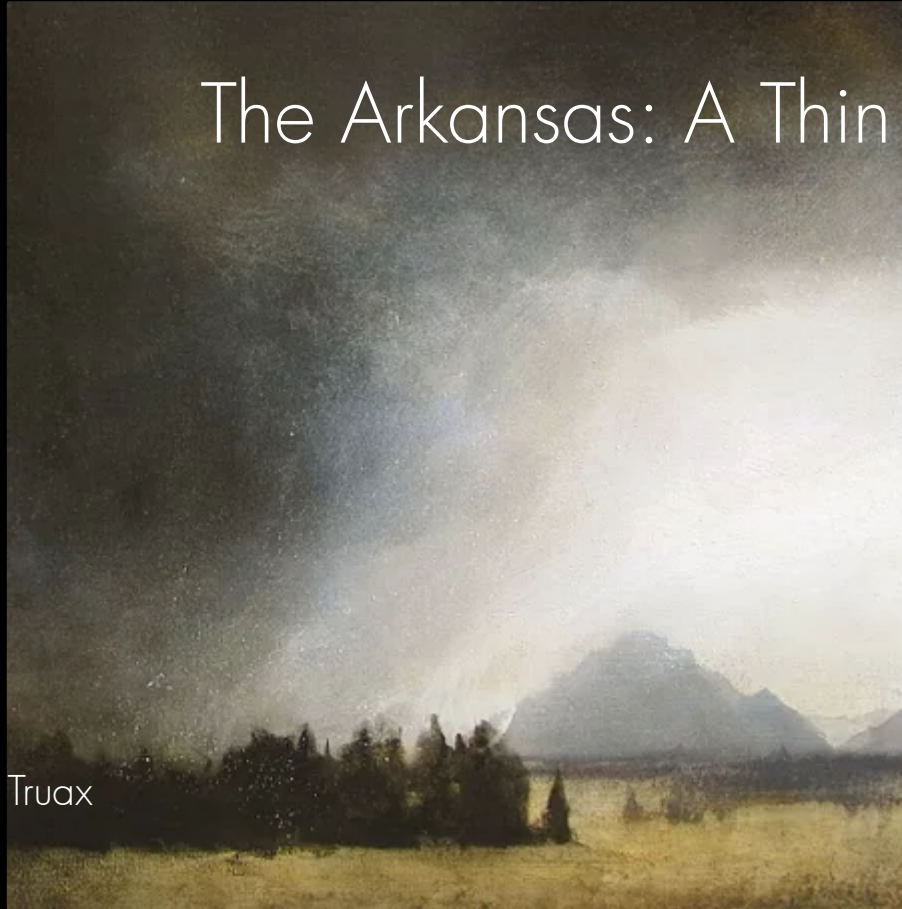


The Arkansas: A Thin Record

Travis Truax



Oil on canvas by Kathryn Turner

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by Travis Truax

There is a place in southern Kansas that lasts. A bit of landscape, a bit of light, a bit of wind. Reeds, mud, trees. River. The long line of an open hand. A land propped in the middle of things, wired with the mosey of a long, patient river.

River mornings. River watching.

I sit with the Arkansas.

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Born in the Rockies, the Arkansas River is a braided line across the plains, a messy collection of where it's been: Royal Gorge, Garden City, Dodge City. It is a mountain river with a prairie heart. It is a river of mud, wind—

dark, crawling water. It is a river framed by grass—buffalo and bluestem. Its tattered banks are rife with box turtles. Bits of cottonwood-bark ride the river like lost boats. Sandbars snag upstream limbs. The sky tosses shadows on the water-top. And sometimes, when I stand beside it, I see sunlight glide straight to the river's bottom.

Mud, reeds, and trees. Upstream forget-me-nots. Bottle caps and fishing line.

In southern Kansas, the Arkansas River is red with raw earth and distance. The long river's days are spent eating up space and age. It arrives in southern Kansas with an old traveler's mood: resolute, reserved, calm as summer cattle. Wind ripples are smirks on the water. In spring they are grins.

A bit of landscape, a bit of light, a bit of wind.

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I come to the Arkansas when the morning air is cool, when small, prairie winds stir the cottonwoods. I sit along the shore. I chew grass. I listen. Southern Kansas opens. Charged with the long train of my life, southern Kansas opens. Charged with routine—with the steady pattern of a brick road. With the sycamore shade of morning walks. Southern Kansas opens.

I come dragging along how many come-and-go roads? How many passed-through places? How many stops and starts? The years shift from place to place behind me.

But here—here is a time for stasis. A steady leveling of river-worn rock. A balance.

The Arkansas slips flat and calm between sandbars. A rooster preaches from a far-off farm. A hawk drifts west across a field of sunflowers. I walk an abandoned bridge, reading the spray-painted names of lovers, friends, brothers. I stare at both bends in the river, north and south. Where it's been, where it's going.

The Arkansas carries mountains; it walks open prairie. The Arkansas is a long train, charged with Garden City's leavings. The Arkansas is the life-gift of a Colorado canyon.

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No two mornings on the Arkansas are the same. The sticky sandbars of the Arkansas grow and fade; they disappear with the spring runoff. Each day they are a different length, a different shape. The shore collects new items each evening; each morning I find them. A trash bag. A new branch. The scribbled notes of sweethearts.

I gather palm-size rocks and build small dams along the shore, catching cottonwood leaves.

The long line of red water flowing by me is bound for Port Catoosa. Tulsa. Trackless Oklahoma backroads. It spreads toward Little Rock, mile after mile. East across marsh and mountain. East beyond Pine Bluff. East to meet the Mississippi, mud and heart and all.

Along the old haunts of Quapaw and French trappers, the Arkansas ends.

I am lulled into this daydream each morning, imagining the river's trip: its long route south and east, beyond Kansas, beyond the bumps of the Ozarks; its big spill into Huck Finn's world; its slow careen with salt.

Each morning, I am fooled by the river's trick.

And the trick is the trees. They steal my view. They take the river out of town into prairie land—a place my imagination holds to. My eyes scour the tops of cottonwoods. Then, like a tag-along dog, my imagination jumps, following the river, inventing its course. Before long I am on a raft under a bridge in Little Rock, waving to the morning traffic. Before long, there are bayous. Before long, the Gulf.

The final spill of a long, patient river. A thin ribbon—bound for New Orleans' open arms.

I forget where I am. I can hardly help it. My eyes are led downstream to larger things, a horizon of old homes, chicken coops, a vague bridge a mile down that I have yet to visit.

My imagination is drenched in landscape, in possibility, in space the river finds without me. The next town. The next bend. Carved out of my imagination, the river greets Oklahoma farmers all afternoon. I have that—imagination. The river allows it. The river allows the world to open, time to soften. The river allows an easy look ahead, or an easy look back. Its ruddy bank holds a past and future still—with a slow current sliding between the two.

It is a snaking path out of Kansas. A long goodbye.

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I return to the edge. The bank. The close-at-hand. I give up the bridge and the big views. I watch what the river is doing now, here in front of me. Crayfish. Driftwood. Turtles. Swallows splay out from beneath the bridge. The river glides by like a good poem. A collected glimpse of now. A small place on the Kansas plains.

I am attached to the earth like an exposed root, arching out above the river.

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I come to the Arkansas River, again and again, to dip my hands in the mud-red water. I come to watch the turtles swim, the swallows fly. I come to be surprised. There is an abandoned bridge. There is mud.

Southern Kansas opens. Charged with the long train of my life, southern Kansas opens.

Travis Truax earned a bachelor's degree in English from Southeastern Oklahoma State University in 2010. His work has appeared in *Flyover Country*, *Quarterly West*, *Pinyon Review*, *The Timberline Review*, and *The Flagler Review*. After college he spent several years working in various national parks in the West. He lives in Bozeman, Montana.

