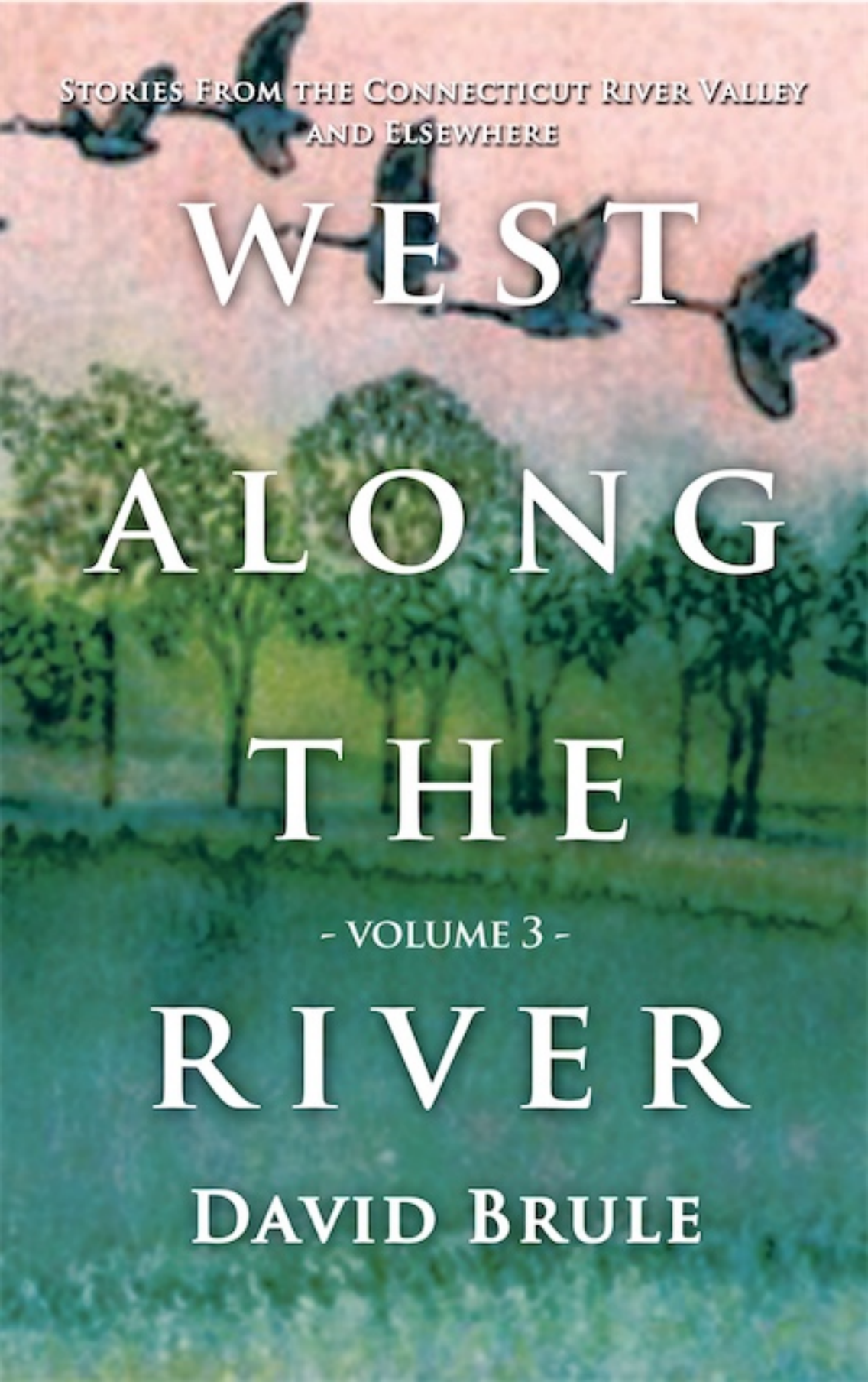


The third in a compilation of observations on the changing seasons, encounters with memorable wildlife and village characters. These stories are populated with tales of witches, wild log drives on the Connecticut river, poignant stories from adventures in Old Russia, summers in France and Spain, essays on Native American history and resurgence.

**WEST ALONG THE RIVER 3:
Stories from the Connecticut River Valley
and Elsewhere**
by David Brule

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The background of the book cover is a soft, painterly illustration of a landscape. The top portion shows a pale, pinkish sky with several dark birds in flight, their wings spread. Below the sky is a dense line of green trees with varying shades of green, suggesting a forest or a riverbank. The bottom portion of the cover is a darker, teal-green color, possibly representing water or a misty ground. The overall style is reminiscent of a watercolor or a soft oil painting.

STORIES FROM THE CONNECTICUT RIVER VALLEY
AND ELSEWHERE

WEST
ALONG
THE
- VOLUME 3 -
RIVER

DAVID BRULE

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Growing Up on the River

March 2014

Red Rocks, the Narrows—

Just waiting for the springtime, caught between ice and mud, has put me in a reflective mood. So bear with me.

I'm wondering how many of you have thought deeply about where you were born and raised, about the impact of that place on your life's trajectory, on your values and outlook, on your sense of who you are?

More and more, I've been wondering about the reason, the forces at work, the quirks of fate that put me here in this spot. Who were the people, generations ago, who set me down on the banks of the Connecticut River Valley?

I know this is true for some of you: the landscape, and in particular this river in its many moods, has shaped us, made us who we are.

This Valley drew in our ancestors, whether they were farmers, factory workers, shopkeepers, or more ancient peoples, the Pocumtuck, the Nipmuk, the Sokoki or Narragansett, all drawn to this spiritual place by the falls.

So a number of years ago, I set about trying to write down what I felt about this place on the banks of the river. I've shared dozens of stories with you in the past about this, and below, I'll start at the beginning, as I remember it.

1957. This long river has always been here.

We came to live on its banks in the house above the Narrows when I was not yet one year old, after the War.

The river is calm in the early morning. Mist rises up in wreaths, the first of September on the Connecticut is always like that. Boat with boy and dog moves slowly through the Narrows. A dip of the oars from time to time encourages the old wooden rowboat to glide through the fog. We drift between high red rock sides of the cleft in silence.

It's 8 AM, the oarlocks creak a bit, the dog in the bow shifts. Circles left behind on the surface by the dripping oars mark our path over the water. It's deep here, maybe over 100 feet, but we're headed for the shallows of the marsh on the other side at the Cove, a little bit downriver.

Tribal people had known this place as Peskeompskut, the place where the river has split the rock. In the depths below us are sunken massive chains from 1910, used and abandoned by the log drivers to hold back the logs come down from the upper reaches. Farther below the ghost of chains is the deep hole of an ancient plunge pool formed more than 20,000 years before.

But as a twelve-year-old sitting in a boat that morning, I wouldn't know that part of the story for another fifty years. Nor was anyone there to tell me that this river was going to be home for me.

Drawn down to the shore from our snug house on the hill above, I followed the path to the edge as soon as I could prove I could swim. There had been too many drowned in the river's history for parents to allow children to play on the banks. A treacherous drop-off a few feet out could lead you down through dark water to the abyss. It was scary and black in the waters, but irresistible.

The river has a smell that is unmistakable, and it imprinted itself in me early. The smell of sand, mud, water against rock, fertile tropical valley where dinosaurs roamed, river flavored of pine, moss, fish, grasses and cattails. That in

fact this river flowed through my veins and in the memory of my DNA, I would find out much, much later.

That foggy morning in the September silence was just one of the river's moods.

Winter often froze its surface two feet thick, the sound of ice booming in the dark night reached right into the bedrooms of the little house above. I waited there with visions of the fabled snow owl to come down the river of ice one of those frozen nights. Yellow fierce eyes, wisdom of the far north, hooting with the booming of the snowy-covered river.

In the early spring, the chaos of the break-up moved inexorably down, a wall of ice ramming straight into our shore, scraping the cattail marsh, grinding against the red rock, piling high in the *débâcle*, the side-slipping away in reluctance and anger from the immovable shore and roiling through the choking narrows.

Summer brought people to the river, I didn't like that. My solitude and reveries were violated by the speeding boats, water skiers, the vulgarity of picnic trash, the penetrating splitting sound of the outboard motor. The river fluctuated then, drawn down by the mills to power their generators. That's when the mudflats were exposed. Sandpipers, plovers, and herons came to feed, and the shallow marshes became the Cape Cod of my mind, never having seen the real thing, never having been that far from home.

Autumn brought the ducks and geese from the north. In my imagination they carried with them the empty reaches of faraway places, the tundra, *the taiga*, the pine-scented wind wafting downstream.

Unlike other children, taking only a little of my time for baseball and bicycles, the river had me locked in its spell. I felt safe there. I was at home with river mud on my feet, legs,

and arms. The river was in my nostrils and lungs, sun reflected from its surface burned my face, into my mind, my heart swelled with the rank scent, its presence quieted my young spirit, gave me assurance and steadiness.

Integrated with the river, I was later to carry this spirit within me to places far away from my homeland banks.

I was beginning a long and unconscious apprenticeship; I didn't know it at the time.

Something ancient was awakening in me. Some benign presence was speaking to me through the murmurings in the stone and in the flowing water.

Because of this time, I would be at ease in multiple worlds.

Because of this time, I would come to learn that being here in this place was no accident.

Good-bye, Old Paint....

January 2017

Erving'side—

Some of you are old enough to remember that western song of generations ago about a cowboy leaving Cheyenne. That refrain popped into my head last month, only I wasn't thinking about a horse named Old Paint and I wasn't leaving Cheyenne, but I was saying good-bye to a faithful old automobile and, in a way, to a part of our youth back when times were simpler.

Last month the moment came to sell a powerful and beautiful, even iconic, automobile that served as our magic carpet which carried us through a land of once-upon-a-time, and far away: *La Belle France*.

Starting in the 70s, we spent school vacations in Paris and Brittany, visiting family. Back then, a fabled French automobile called the DS 20, built by Citroën, came into our lives. The model name, DS, is pronounced *day-ess*, exactly like the French word for goddess (*déesse*). Clever marketing, *hein?*

My father-in-law, a retired French businessman owned this car, which was the luxury vehicle of choice for the upper bourgeoisie in the post-war era of Charles De Gaulle.

An aerodynamic, tear-drop shaped auto, it represented the top of the line in French engineering and sophistication of the time. It wasn't blunt, long, wide and loaded with fins like the American Cadillac. The Citroën DS had wind-swept lines, broad in front and smaller behind, its shape designed to glide through the air rather than plow through it.

It had an avant-garde look, and fascinating hydraulics: once you turned the key, you had to pause while the DS

literally rose up from a low-slung resting position. First the back quarters lifted up on seeming air suspension, then the front end rose in turn to give the privileged riders inside a lighter than air sensation. The plush interior, with thick foam seats covered in what seemed like red velvet, added to comfort enveloping the passengers.

All French cars of the time were stick-shift, but this one was an innovative semi-automatic: one shifted from park to drive, using a lever on the steering post, then you just stepped on the mushroom-shaped accelerator to sally forth.

When we pulled out from the curb, it felt like the stately Queen Mary leaving the quay, moving gracefully and majestically out into traffic.

My father-in-law, a dapper and dignified gentleman of the *vieille France* style, had served in World War I as a courier/runner between the trenches in what the French call the “War of 14-18”. He was at the battles of Verdun and the Argonne, and was lucky to have survived. When he was in the mood, he often told us tales of those times that made our blood run cold.

His father had been a friend of Gustave Eiffel, and as a child, father-in-law had actually visited the Eiffel Tower with Monsieur Eiffel. That certainly gave him special status in our eyes, as did his wonderful automobile.

The Citroën was garaged near his first-floor apartment in the quiet Paris suburb of Asnières, situated on a meander of the Seine, downstream from Paris, which was visible from his apartment window. Back in the days of the Impressionists, this suburb was still a village, its riverside cafés a favorite haunt of Van Gogh, his brother Théo, and other artists. It’s not far from the Island of the Grande Jatte, depicted and made famous by Georges Seurat during his pointilliste period.

I was the designated chauffeur, with my father-in-law seated beside me to keep a close eye on my driving technique. With the rest of the family seated behind, and I'd gingerly back out of the garage, after waiting the proper amount of time for the rear end and the front end to rise up and be ready to proceed.

And we'd be off on our excursion for the day.

One memorable trip took us out from Paris, motoring down old poplar-lined routes along the Seine to Normandy and the home of Claude Monet at Giverny. That was in the early days of the recent restoration of Monet's home and gardens, when Giverny was still a village, and not yet a target of mass tourism. We had the place almost to ourselves.

The gardens of course were magnificent, as Monet had planted them, and the Japanese footbridge, freshly reconstructed, arched over the lily pond with the water lilies in full bloom. Our father-in-law, walking by then with the aid of a cane, sat quietly on the vintage park bench waiting for us to finish roaming the garden paths and visiting Monet's kitchen, all daffodil yellow and delft blues.

Other trips took us farther afield: more regularly in the 80s and 90s on the seven-hour drive out to the family homestead in central Brittany. By then, we were already something of an anomaly on the highway, the DS being bypassed by zippier and sportier Citroëns, Renaults, or Fiats, as styles, tastes, and fuel economies evolved.

After my father in law passed away, the DS remained at the home in Brittany, better suited for country driving and touring than for city traffic in Paris. It was then that our classic automobile took us, free as the wind in summertime, to lovely places such as Croazon, Douarnenez, Quimper, St. Malo, and Cap Fréhel.

Parked on the edge of the dunes and *landes* full of purple heather and yellow broom-bush, where we could look out across the Channel to England, the DS looked like the subject of a post card or travel photo from the 1950s. It was a wonderful feeling, after a day there at the beach, after making our way up through the dunes back to the hardtop, when we settled sun-burned, sea-salted and sandy, into the plush interior of our coach, like pampered royalty.

Those were the days, but of course they had to end.

By early November of 2016, the DS had been resting inactive in our Breton garage for several years. Really too big and ill-adapted for even our country roads, it came time to sell.

Right up until 2010, it still was used to get to the village for the shopping, and when we parked there on the small square, it continued to attract a lot of attention and offers to buy it. The DS especially caught the eye of many a gypsy clan passing through.

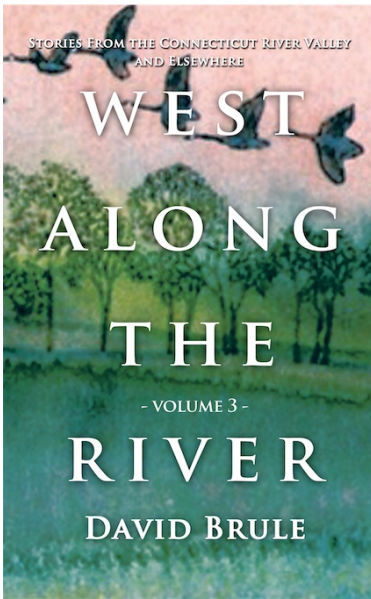
As a note of contemporary culture, in France as elsewhere, one rarely uses the inappropriate term gypsy any longer. Most politically correct people in France use the name *gens du voyage* instead of *gitan* for these travelers. Regardless, these groups of travelers do love big cars, and they really wanted this one, as soon as they saw it.

But we didn't want to sell it to just anyone, to have it driven into the ground and then cannibalized for parts.

Finally, just last month, our goddess, the DS was sold to a collector of vintage automobiles who promised to house it and pamper it as a relic of a wonderful past.

Those of you who have loved a car know what it's like. When you have to part with it, you hate to see it go. Our DS represented the best of our summer carefree days, our magic carpet that took us back in time through marvelous

landscapes, as we motored across the now vanishing France that we once knew, already so long ago.



The third in a compilation of observations on the changing seasons, encounters with memorable wildlife and village characters. These stories are populated with tales of witches, wild log drives on the Connecticut river, poignant stories from adventures in Old Russia, summers in France and Spain, essays on Native American history and resurgence.

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