

## Land Between Two Rivers

***K. Lauren de Boer*** was Executive Editor of *EarthLight*, Journal for Ecological and Spiritual Living for ten years, from 1995 to 2005. His interviews, essays, and poetry have been published and reprinted in several publications and anthologies and he has interviewed dozens of leading edge visionaries and thinkers in the area of spiritual ecology and consciousness. Lauren is currently on the faculty of The Institute for Educational Studies / Endicott College in Beverly, Massachusetts, where he teaches courses on Nature, Creativity, and Identity and the Great Work. He has presented workshops on the practice of spiritual ecology at national conferences. In 2001, he gave the Gottlieb Lecture in Boulder, California, an annual lecture series featuring leading edge thinkers in spirituality, peace, and ecology.

Lauren currently serves on the board for the Institute for Sacred Cinema, on the advisory board for the Center for Ecozoic Studies in Greensboro, North Carolina and is founding board member for the Epic of Evolution Society, a network of scientists, theologians, artists, and educators dedicated to integrating the evolutionary discoveries of science with cosmology and to bringing an awareness of the sacred Universe Story to mainstream culture. He is currently at work on a book exploring the avian spirit that traces the lore and lives of four species of birds. Lauren's has writings posted at his website ([www.k-lauren.net](http://www.k-lauren.net)), as well as links to a Kindred Spirits directory of centers in North America whose work is dedicated to ecology, cosmology, and spirituality.

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My love for the land between two rivers simmered slowly for years. It would only become a well-flavored broth when I had learned to become enamored with ghosts and transplants, to make the loss of the dispossessed my own, and to accept the strident claims of the present. This land named Iowa - an expanse stretching between the Mississippi River to the east and the Missouri river to the west - was once riotous with diverse life. Hard maples and bur oaks dominated the river bluffs. Woodland ravines wore cloaks of beautiful ferns, interspersed with diverse softwoods and forest wildflowers like yellow ladies-slippers, jack-in-the-pulpit, and trout lily.

But Iowa was to become the most deeply altered terrain on the North American continent. By 1900: two thirds of the 6.7 million acres of forest cover in Iowa – gorgeous stands of white oak, red cedar, and hard maple - had disappeared; 3,000 miles of rivers had been dammed and channelized; vast wetlands were drained out of existence. In slightly less than one human life span, a 30-million-acre blanket of tallgrass prairie was reduced to one tenth of one per cent of its former size - a mere 30,000 acres - by the plow. The names are legion: Bluestem, dropseed, compass plant, coneflower, gentian, and blazing star. Successive waves of transformation - pioneer settlement, agriculture, gypsum and coal mining, the railroad, the creation of giant recreational reservoirs - swept through. Vast communities of prairie grasses and wildflowers became huge tracts of non-native grassland or mono-cultured farmland. Frost aster, switchgrass, phlox, prairie anemone, hoary vervain, coreopsis were given their untimely leave. And, with this habitat gone, abundant populations of elk, bison, wild turkey, deer, prairie chickens, bear, wolves, river otter, beaver, waterfowl, and shorebirds vanished. White wild indigo, june grass, purple meadow rue, sawtooth sunflower, Scribner's panic grass...and more than 200 additional prairie plants.

As a young man in a small town in the heart of the state, something in this ravaged landscape won my heart. It began with a trip one summer day to an isolated rural spot on the Des Moines River.

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To reach the Des Moines River valley, I drive due south from Prairie City, past white two-storied clapboard farmhouses, A-frame pig sties, silos, tiny country churches, and patchwork fields of sorghum, soybeans, and corn. The road follows the contour of long rolling hills blanketed with some of the richest soil on Earth, formed from a departed sea of tallgrass prairie. Redwing blackbirds, brown-headed cowbirds, and English house sparrows dominate the farmyards and fence posts.

Just when I feel that this roadscape will roll on without end, I pass over the rise of a hill and abruptly hit gravel. The fields go wild and brambly and I osmos, as if through a membrane, into another realm. The old Rambler station wagon rumbles and clunks over the roadbed. Dust roils up and anoints everything in a kind of strange baptism. I grind it in my teeth and my hair turns bristly. The road is now little more than a dirt path.

The purr of the 6-cylinder engine and the rattle of the springs accompany the drone of cicadas in roadside transplants: Ragweed, Queen Anne's lace, and now feral hemp planted in World War II as fiber for rope production. When I reach an abandoned gypsum mine now filled with water from periodic floodwaters and an underground spring, I stop and get out. I hunker down in the weeds on its banks and peer into the water. Bass, bluegill, and green sunfish hang in the crystal water as if on a string, turning slowly to meet my shadow. They glide and stop. Glide and stop. The stop is sudden and perfect, like blinking out a frame of the action. It is high summer and so the carp have surfaced in raucous schools, their soft mouths extended to suck the surface. An Asian fish, I realize. More transplants, making their way, eating the eggs of natives. I toss a pebble and their scattering boils the water with a golden flash of scales.

I head across some rusted rail tracks, then down through a labyrinth of summer plant growth, emerging suddenly on the bank where the river does an almost hairpin turn. The flow is very deep here, so deep the river appears oddly still, even though I know the current is moving across the riverbed with sure steady strength. I imagine the murky world down there, picturing the giant bottom-dwellers I'd seen in the backs of pick-ups and in photographs in the Outdoor section of the Des Moines Register. These catfish hung, big as a small man, on stout poles between two people. It was said they came from a hidden place on the river, a well-kept secret from anyone but the locals. That place, my brother's father-in-law finally revealed to me, was this turn in the river where I stand.

Years ago, a train had derailed here and the boxcars that tumbled into the river were left to the elements. "They spawn in those cars," was his only elaboration on his revelation. I pick my way across logs and rocks out to a perch on a rusty boxcar protruding above water. Feeling the dust and heat from the drive, I rashly plunge in. The current is more swift than I anticipate and before I'm able to reach the far bank, I'm swept downstream to a long strip of sand. I go to explore the trees lining the beach; but as I near them, I see that they are only the ghosts of trees, the shells of giant drowned bur oaks, gray, stark, and weathered against the sky. Their brittle branches are adorned with long ivies, the barkless trunks cloaked with brilliant green mosses. Blue herons retreat in lazy, lumbering flight on my approach. The dried mud crackling beneath my bare feet bears no footprints, only the tracks of receding floodwaters. This strange forest, with its unlikely beauty, was wrought from an Army Corps of Engineers project to create the Red Rock recreational reservoir in 1969.

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Years later, in the fall of the year, I return, perhaps to fish, perhaps just to turn rocks at the edge of the water. This time the drive to the river passes the Neil Smith

National Wildlife Refuge, a newly established 5,000-acre preserve dedicated to restoring tallgrass prairie and savanna habitat.

A crisp October day turns by slow increments into a delicious suspension in time. I catch no fish, so I idly watch the sky as an endless, shifting, cavorting crowd twists and turns in strands and dots against ochre-lit clouds. The migrating waterfowl pass for hours overhead. Their calls and wing beats move lucidly in and out of my consciousness, like thoughts and images in those fragile moments between sleep and waking. Something jars loose in me and runs untethered with the river. In its steady flow, I feel the tug, the relentless claim nature holds on all things, indifferent to possessor or dispossessed. An unaccountable beauty extends out of the mundane and the lost, shining out of the gray silence of bur oaks. I study the boxcars and discover that these intruders, too, have become an intricate part of the form of this place. I slowly realize that I am surrounded by my own kind. There is something in me of all of them - the transplants, migrants, and ghosts; the opportunists, the natives, and the dispossessed.

A pheasant, too near, crows loudly, startling me out of my reverie - yet another transplant. I take this as a sign and head for home. Out of this wounded land - a river valley once nestled by prairie and shaded by forest - the steady sure pulse of life continues to combine, configure, adjust, and restore. A fragile beauty simmers, its strange and gathering flavors waiting to be tasted.

For further Information on the author you can go to [www.k-lauren.net](http://www.k-lauren.net)