

To the River...

A National Poetry Day
resource from Arvon and
Caleb Parkin

Key Stage 3-5

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To the River Stour

some call you *S'toor*, like *poor*
and I thought this your proper
posher name because mum
pronounced you that way

others called you *St-our*, like *our*
and maybe that's your name
too as you wiggle like an idyll
on a National Trust postcard

through Essex-Suffolk floodplain
horizon pinned on with spires
punctured by telephone masts
ears trained on each glottal stop

coppiced willows flank your banks
boaters meander as they squint
to find tributaries into Constable
gorgeous and serene so flat and yet

I longed for the wide mouth
of estuaries the way they aren't
one thing or another their brackish
manner part-play part-threat

Stour, St-oor, St-hour, you're a Site
of Special Scientific Pinterest
a keepnet for Nordic walkers
a cowpat for bluebottle tourists

and streams of gleaming Land
Rovers yearning for a blemish
a picture-perfect cream tea
on an English patina, cracking

Caleb Parkin, from *The Coin* (Broken
Sleep Books, 2022); Longlisted in the
Gingko AONB Prize 2022.

Glossary:

- **idyll**: 'an extremely happy, peaceful, or picturesque period or situation, typically an idealized or unsustainable one'.
- **glottal stop**: 'a momentary check on the airstream caused by closing the glottis (the space between the vocal cords) and thereby stopping the vibration of the vocal cords' (eg, saying "wa'er" instead of "water" in an Essex accent).
- **Site of Special Scientific Interest**: (not Pinterest)
- a formal conservation designation for a particular area, for its wildlife and natural landscape.
- **coppiced**: 'area of woodland in which the trees or shrubs are periodically cut back to ground level to stimulate growth'
- **tributaries**: 'rivers or streams flowing into a larger river or lake'
- **brackish**: '(of water) slightly salty, as in river estuaries.'
- **patina**: 'green or brown film on the surface of bronze or similar metals, produced by oxidation over a long period'.



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Warm-up questions to think about:

My poem addresses the River Stour, which is near where I grew up, on the Essex-Suffolk border.

1. What's your favourite line in the poem and why?
2. Which line puzzles you and you might like to explore further?
3. Is it just about the river? What other figures, themes or ideas do you think and how are they introduced?
4. What hints are there about how I feel about that landscape? How do you feel about the landscape where you grew up?
5. At the start of the poem, I've explored different ways the river is pronounced - S'toor, like poor, or St-our, like our. Why do you think I've done this? Are there any places near you which have different names, or different ways to say the same name?
6. My poem gives some hints about tourism. Which details can you find about tourism? How do you think I feel about that element of the landscape?



John Constable - The Hay Wain (1821)



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Gathering Material:

Let's write a poem based on a landscape feature you know. It could be a river, or something else in your environment. You'll address it directly, as a 'you' in your poem.

Step One:

Make a mindmap or list of a few rivers, hills, trees, buildings you see regularly, in your environment. They can be natural, or humanmade. It could be a hill fort, mountain, gas refinery, shopping centre. These are all part of our landscapes and all good to write about.

Which of these do you feel you have a relationship with? Why is that? Is there someone you associate with it – a friend, relative, relationship? Do you like it, dislike it, or a bit of both? Make some notes.

Step Two:

Decide which one you'd like to focus on. It's especially good if it does have different names or ways of pronouncing its name. And it's especially good if your feelings about it are mixed. Now use all of your senses – sight, smell, sound, touch, sight, ideas – to note down everything you can about that place. Include what you love about it and what you find weird/icky/annoying.

Step Three:

Consider the name or names of that landscape feature. What do you feel about its different names? How might it feel about those names? Could you incorporate this idea of names and naming, of different ways to say the same place, into your poem?

Step Four:

Write a list of other questions you'd like to ask that place. How might it feel about its location? About how people feel about it? All the visitors who go there? The other aspects of the landscape which it's situated?



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To the River/Shopping Centre/Mountain...

Using your notes, set a timer for – say – 20 minutes (or as long as you've got). Whenever you stall in your writing, you've got all that mindmap or list material to inspire you.

Get as much down as you can in this time. Keep the pen moving and accept any surprises which might come up.

You might join up various aspects of your note, or just freewrite (keeping the pen moving, not worrying about sense, spelling, grammar) and bring some of these notes in when it's useful.

You need clay to make a sculpture; you need words to make a poem. You can't do it wrong! If you're writing, you're doing it right.

Build up some clay to work with. It won't be a poem yet, it'll be material to shape.



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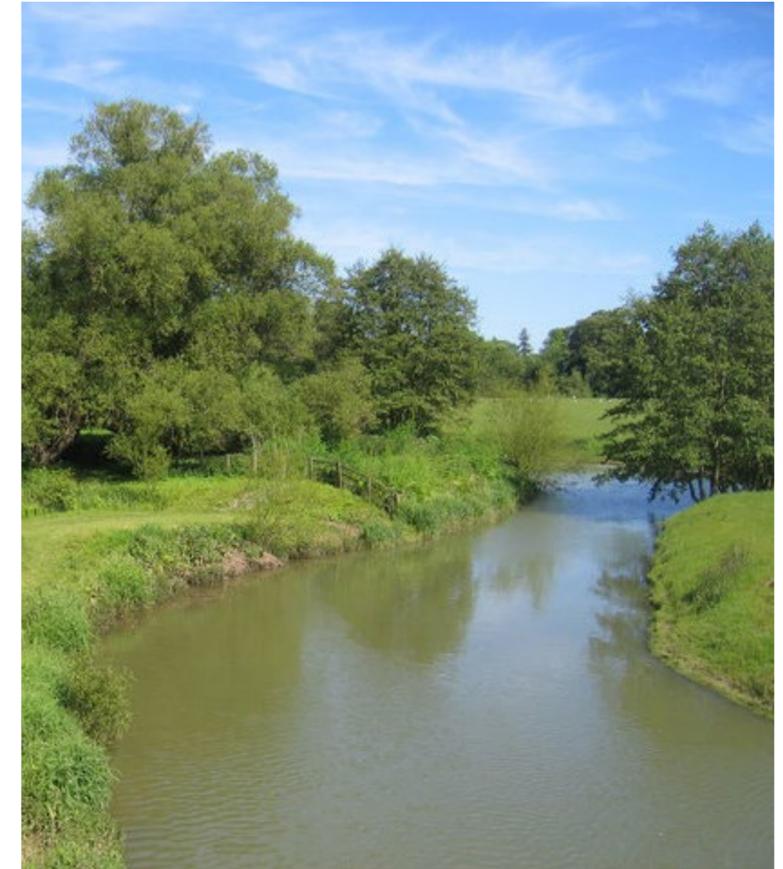
Swap, share, celebrate:

Swapping your work is one of the best ways to develop it.

Read it to your partner out loud. This is a draft and isn't finished! So enjoy what is working in it, celebrate your unique way of saying things.

If you're listening, do so with appreciation. First of all, let your partner know what is working.

Then we'll start to think about taking the writing further...



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Start to shape it:

Drafting is just the beginning of any poem. Let's start to think about developing it.

What is Working?

Look through, and underline at least one image, phrase or fragment which really stands out to you, that feels really clear, fresh, new or funny. Try underlining at least three.

Specific and Surprising / Adding Texture:

Underline or highlight three things in your writing which are vague or broad, and make them specific and surprising. For example, instead of a 'jacket' was it an 'orange Gortex cagoule'? Was it just a 'tree' or was it a 'storm-addled poplar'? Change at least three of these, making the general, specific.

This 'texture' (as Mary Oliver called it) can be what brings your poem to life.

Shaping it:

My poem is in quatrains, four-line stanzas, with fairly short lines. This gives more focus on individual words I've used (as I'm playing with language). Longer lines tend to give more of an expansive feel.

What feels like the right shape for your poem? You could try out quatrains, or have it all run on in one block, or make it a concrete poem (in the shape of your subject). You could use shorter lines, if you want the reader to focus on individual words. Or

you could have longer lines, which give your reader a sense of looking out over the panorama – if you're writing about, say, a cliff, or mountain.

Try out some different shapes (AKA forms) for your poem. Which one suits the subject? If you can, put the poem down for a while – pop it safely in a drawer or folder. Then come back to it with fresh eyes to do another round of editing. Having this perspective always helps when I'm editing.

That's it! I hope you've enjoyed this activity and to read some of the poems it inspires.



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