

# Susquehanna



Poetry by Jnana Hodson

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***for Tim Provencal***

JNANA HODSON

# Susquehanna

1

She could be the street  
as much as the river

or a town so depressed  
a state liquor store next  
to the railroad diner is barren.

Or even a county  
clad in Holstein cowhide  
and forest.

Ms. Suzy Q. Hannah  
is what we'll call her.

## 2

A piece of armor or leather  
is not a fish.

Along the rocky shoreline, a rat runs across  
my path  
and scurries back under a rock; I step again  
and another rustles through brittle stalks  
before its tan rump and tail dive for shelter.  
With another two steps, a third rat repeats  
the scuttle.

Their ancestors no doubt worked the  
factories.

As they say, there are always more ways  
to skin a rat.  
There's always an underbelly to progress.

When the discharge is stanchd, typically in  
late summer,  
the riverbed is stippled puddles.  
Its channel, littered with muddy industrial  
debris,  
is studded with a sequence of rusted grocery  
carts,  
bicycles, washers, refrigerators plus tires.  
As well as rusting chemical drums and iron  
coils.

In no particular order.

A dead fish, two feet long, dry and brown  
holds leaves as scales against desiccated  
bones.

Another is mostly a head with two big holes  
where its eyes were: mouth agape  
to speak silent words you don't understand.

The dam once powered shoe and cigar  
factories.

### 3

Drawn down to muscle  
“in the quiet hills of her own divinity”  
I bicycle across the bridge into fog  
at sunrise.

In the night, my dreams would be chased  
by a train or a subway while my enemy  
remains on the other shore, marching  
and stomping: Crash! Splash! Crash!

Before I swim back to sleep.

## 4

Water spools over the dam  
into the common pool

where it leaps again  
in a hydraulic jump  
as if trying to return home

through parched leaves  
or the loves that sent me reeling.

5

Usually, I saunter about in a shroud of music.  
When I cross a green steel truss bridge  
now reserved for pedestrians

and ghostly flashes of mountain bikes,  
or pause in the middle on my return,  
it hardly matters what I'm humming.

Handel, Dvorak, Johann Strauss Jr., or  
*Showboat*

all could play here.

You really don't know the chorus

do you?



# 7

Its fruits demand patience.  
Or instill it.

Hold on and keep motionless.  
There's no telling what's under that covering,  
that face of swirling mouths.

I'm adrift  
except for the office.

I've promised to hide her, if need be.  
Wherever she's run now.

## 8

After the chromatic flotillas of leaves,  
snow falls in the water and clumps together  
as floating clouds.

These days  
every time of exit is a death,  
one her eyes, especially, inscribe.

Just watch.

Approaching zero Fahrenheit  
the surface reflects light more sharply  
than at warmer readings.

Which state of discomfort  
presents the more obsidian  
transparent absence?

As if I were choosing between lovers.

## 9

A floating sheet of ice  
could be an unmanned rowboat.

A rhythmic lapping over its glassy surface  
shimmers and for a moment

I desire her again,  
this time, more svelte than satin.

Let me repeat, there are no snakes  
in winter.

\* \* \*

You wouldn't guess the ice has grown  
three feet thick, at the least. From the shore,  
it's only a snow-covered field  
in a gilt-edged sunset.

By midnight, I must move my car  
to the other side of the street,  
this being Thursday.

If it were only such connections between us.

10

Pink river  
rosy sky  
4 p.m. winter.

Purple  
the previous  
sunset.

As for youth,  
“you don’t know what you’ll become.”

Blue river  
reflecting  
blue sky.

Calm, chilled  
the ice still thick.

Inky, before the full moon eclipse.

## 11

Her sister is blue eye-shade around  
blue eyes in deep sockets.  
Two braids in her blonde hair convert  
night sky to an El Greco.

Only her dreams of liquid serpents admit  
white cragginess of boiling fury.

She could drive anyone up the wall and now  
she's upset because the guy she likes  
danced with everyone but her at the  
party.

When she falls asleep, her bed floats into  
space  
or gurgles down a spiral like Alice.

We let the river flow between us.

## 12

Snow on icy rocks above the dam:  
miniature clouds upon far-off mountains.

But I extrapolate.

When wilderness cirrus covers glacial  
heights,  
which one's more spectacular?

Relationship could be everything.

She works as a go-go dancer "in some dive"  
and her body's sore this morning.

It all depends on your view.

## 13

Early one Sunday afternoon, I return  
an hour after the young nun's walked the  
pathway

and missed the green bridge transforming  
into a Coast Guard icebreaker:

shards the size of sedans and tractor-trailers  
turn upward, nearly touching the span.

This is a stampede, racing toward Maryland  
while the prow and masts churn, pulsating  
upstream.

Now let us pray our rosary of snowflakes.  
Have mercy on us, whoever.

Sunlight shoots through a wafer cloud  
onto silver snow.

This summer-green water remains  
enclosed by pale mounds on the banks.

More streams join in the flow,  
all headed downhill.

Premonitions fill the air  
for those who heed them.

\* \* \*

This once, I'm the first to violate the new  
powder  
with footprints. The green water  
ripples  
warmer than the surrounding air.

Long filaments drawn over the dull wall  
come up in limey bubbles  
the color of Florida surf.

Just whose dog is this, anyway,  
running out to sniff me?

Back in the kitchen, what's-her-name insists

I look very medieval now  
with this page-boy hair.

After she's headed home,  
fog will submerge the valley.

## 15

Gray fluffs yield  
to a deluge that  
soaks the waist-deep snow.

Inevitably, the river expands more than rising  
in a sullen response to containment.  
Its melting chocolate climbs into trees.

This world began as a vault between waters  
that soon teamed with serpents  
and originated all over again with Noah.

This is the way of anger, even God's anger  
when it gushes. Creator and Destroyer  
twist together in muddy rage or fire.

Wind rips against the current  
to form countless cups as an offering.  
Deep-throated drumming  
accompanies a dance of vengeance.

Rushing faster and higher,  
the flood impedes me from my refuge island  
beside the mill trace.

The basketballs trapped three weeks  
below the falling water in some epic game of  
polo

finally vanish, along with the logs  
in a clean sweep scouring the embankment.

This time, I see  
she was a little of this  
and a little of that.

## 16

Surging and fertile,  
the manic inundation  
turns from sulky to joyous.

The phone cord  
connects that.

What's your answer?

Her roommate talks only of her boyfriend  
who has a girlfriend.

At least there's no deception.

The fire department  
keeps an eye on the level.

\* \* \*

The overflow recedes, leaving  
frozen pearls in twigs and weeds:  
jewels in sunlight.

The waitress returns  
and you haven't even looked at the menu.

We've been through three Greek tragedies  
as antagonists.

The Romans are coming, anyway.

Spring rain and melting:  
fields, roads, walkways, tree trunks  
– everything's now a trout stream.

Mud season: ruts six inches deep  
the hood of some cars a Jackson Pollack  
with fat-headed mudfish swimming up-road.

We find apples rotting in the melting snow.  
The horses and cattle are quite shaggy.

Downstream, the city paints  
the Exchange Street bridge gray

though any yellow, resembling year-round  
sunlight over the stream,

would be more beneficial  
than yet another dull storm cloud.

A second-floor window emits orange and  
purple stage lighting  
as a man in a well-upholstered chair holds  
*The Evening Press* open.

He reads about a serious clubbing with a  
hammer  
around the corner from my apartment.

A barroom saxophone punctuates  
police sirens on the street.

When I return, the Telegraph Street span  
is missing.

Recognize a vacillating border  
as a practical necessity

where you don't want to get in over your  
head  
for starters.

Still, once spring arrives  
the sun on my skin is as delicious as a  
woman's loving touch.

Her "hello" is now dulcet as feather down.  
Another mails me a bandana and a paper  
airplane.

I'm not here for her good as much as mine.  
Even flies and dragonflies express this.

I could have learned to fish  
or canoe here.

Gnats, in their scattershot agitation  
bounce off invisible trampolines.

Midday sun  
glints off the mirror.

Even when I could,  
I rarely ventured far out on the ice.

They heard me coming  
by the chattering of stacked plates

back when I walked heavier  
and was skinnier.

In time, the greenery  
thickens. Even on  
the myriad islands.

My bedroom window faces sunrise.  
    Only a block away,  
the nun's opens onto sunset.

Our parks are renowned  
in some circles  
for their merry-go-rounds.

The sun so bright  
the water's aflame.

Swallows skate the surface.

And then raindrops  
ring out across the expanse.

With all the tricky currents  
and broken glass in mud  
downstream from dairy farms

this is no place for swimming  
even on the most oppressive days.  
But that doesn't stop everyone.

"This room looks like a funeral parlor,"  
a cheap one, at that. "I wish I had a hobby"  
the bored woman said.

Some lives are rivers  
collecting volume  
over long stretches.

Mine, on the other hand,  
will traverse mountains and  
a desert to drink at a spot

where the mud settles. But first,  
as we exercise, saluting the sun,  
a cat chases our shadows.

Endurance is rewarded  
with a nibble on the worm.

The muscle's  
contracting and unflexing.

The impediment between shores  
gathers energy to be released

as desired. If nothing more,  
as flood control these days.

Even passion needs direction  
to preclude violence.

In the open, her bare brown body  
wears turquoise and sparkling silver.

Water striders ripple a still pool  
viewed through a web.

At last, her one eye blinks  
with love at high noon.

Beware when she's plain green  
and moody. When she appears  
shallow. She'll still sweep you away.

Sometimes she's garbed in blue  
or white or even gray. Or  
rolls over in a cloudy night.

She can be beguiling or haggard,  
plump or sinewy, the brown speckled  
snake crawling through the valley.

She can be placid as a sandbar  
or the submerged pilings above the dam.  
She'll never be the place you left  
when you return.

Even in your memories

GREAT BEND  
SUSQUEHANNA

the river shallower and more placid than I  
remembered,  
almost dreamy at Great Bend,  
a fisherman thigh-deep in midstream at  
Sidney

DELAWARE & HUDSON RR

Chenango Canal 1837-78  
and another along the Susquehanna

LOST EMPIRE  
UPSTATE

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



In his first home after college, Jnana Hodson lived just blocks from the Susquehanna. His first address was, in fact, Susquehanna Street. He still believes the river has a magical name.

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