

Ben Cosgrove

Headwaters

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Sometime last spring, I was driving through northern Minnesota when the road I was on passed over a small waterway. It was an unremarkable little brook lazily worming through the forest, but a sign on the shoulder identified it as the Mississippi River. Startled, I pulled over and reversed back to the bridge. There it was, the mightiest vein of the continent. From here it would grow dramatically as it moved southward, giving life to Minneapolis, St. Louis, Memphis, New Orleans, and numerous settlements in between, but up here in Paul Bunyan country, it lazed by as an unmajestic trickle. It was oddly thrilling to see so mighty a river in such an undeveloped and vulnerable state — like walking in on a world leader in the nude. Without much further reflection I drove on, inflated by a sense of having been granted a window into the inner life of the Mississippi River, and a feeling that now I knew it better than most because I had seen it like this.

I grew up in central New England and have no great ties to the Mississippi, so it seemed like it might be a meaningful pilgrimage to visit the headwaters of my region's primary river. I would travel up to the border of New Hampshire and Quebec, where rain- and melt-water collect in the four Connecticut Lakes before taking the form of the Connecticut River and flowing 407 miles south to the ocean, plummeting a total of 2,660 vertical feet toward the center of the earth in the process.

The four lakes are numbered in what has always seemed to me a reverse of the logical order. The true headwaters of the river are at the tiny Fourth Connecticut Lake, at the very tip of New Hampshire. When water overflows its banks, it collects just below in the Third Connecticut Lake, then the Second Connecticut Lake, then finally the First Connecticut Lake. I drove up to the Third on New Years Day of this year. It was brilliantly sunny and bitterly cold. The tops of the lakes were frozen solid and covered in a foot or so of powder. I looked west across the lake from the road, towards the small inlet where water from the Fourth must have been trickling in beneath the ice.

One day all this water would be compelled from this stillness by something as banal as gravity to roll and tumble over itself for hundreds of miles, over dams and under bridges,

gathering in places and racing violently in others. It would be joined by the White and the Chicopee and become mighty indeed by the time it passed under I-95. Little by little, all of it would fall away, cleaving Vermont from New Hampshire before bisecting Massachusetts, then Connecticut, to empty into and become part of Long Island Sound.

I was struck, however, by the realization that the water in front of me now had nothing to do with any of that yet. It could tell me nothing of New England, or even of the Connecticut River. It didn't know anything. It wasn't "waiting" to go somewhere. It was just water. I felt strangely disappointed and more than a little ridiculous.

We tend to ascribe a lot of metaphysical significance to waterways. Not only do they make possible our settlements and show us the easiest paths from point to point, but there's also something about the idea of one unbroken chain of water unifying a whole region that feels important to us. We read ourselves into places; we retrofit them with our personalities; we make something of them that they perhaps are not. This alone is what makes them places and not just geography. The Connecticut, like the Mississippi, after all, is just water, helplessly doing what gravity demands of it. We are the ones who would make it anything else. I knew, just as anyone with a map might know, the path it would all take. I knew the rivers it would meet, I knew the towns that had been made possible by the very predictability of its route. The water, obviously, could not know or care about any of this.

I was sorry to lose the feeling that I had seen these great rivers in at their purest and most naked. I wanted to think that I would be able to see something elemental here, not only the germ at the core of the idea of the Connecticut River, but maybe even at the core of the idea of New England. The fact is that the Fourth Connecticut Lake will stop mattering to the fate of the river the instant the water moves down to the Third Lake. It will fall millimeters south, and then it's not part of the lake anymore. It's only water, and it will wander dumbly for hundreds of miles until at last it meets the ocean.