

The Rivers Open Up: Heal Veterans in Mindful Waters

By Jon Graham

Adult Category: First Place

The withered man asks the river: *have you written a poem for us today?*

The river shakes its scraggly willow-beard against the cold.
Last night's spring rain tattoos trees with crystals of ice – frozen tears.

Above an encampment, smoke swirls in morning air
while a fish caught under the highway bridge
sizzles on a flat sheet of scrap metal.
A poached dumpster egg, ready to serve,
cooks over the open fire.

Cardboard signs scribbled with *Veteran* and *Anything Helps*
lie strewn about like debris from an IED.
Tattooed tears drip dry on iced-over faces of veterans, calling for help.

The river is happy to help – on its bank
lies this small city that reeks of PTSD,
its tents camouflaged in willow brush behind a line
of green Walmart dumpsters that smell like living hell.

The withered man sees the veterans and the signs, remembers when he was drafted in the spring of 1970 during the time of the tragedy of Vietnam, the time when he began to wither. His birthday June 5; lottery number 26. He had his induction physical even before graduating, served, came home with a flag and a haircut. Came home to thanklessness.

Soldiers are now dismembered in body and spirit, broken in the deserts of Iraq, Afghanistan. The rivers open up to these wounded warriors, thank them for their service. In Arkansas on the White River and the Ouachita, disabled veterans are taught to fly fish, heal in the wilds of the mindful waters. The soldiers smile, hold up prize catches like spread-finned trophies to the sky. In South Carolina, a bearded elder teaches younger disabled veterans to sail. They leave from the mouth of the Cooper River near Charleston, sail away with the gyre of the sea. Tattooed tears drip from their faces like melting crystals of ice.

Rivers open up,
heals souls in mindful waters.
Leaves of willows sing –

*When Johnny comes marching home again, Hurrah, hurrah!
We'll give him a hearty welcome then, Hurrah, hurrah!
The men will cheer, the boys will shout,*

*The ladies, they will all turn out,
And we'll all feel gay when Johnny comes marching home.*

Patrick Gilmore, 1863
American Civil War Song

This is the poem the river writes for the withered man inside me today –
to honor all who have served.

In peace, it shakes its scraggly willow-beard against the cold.