

## RIVER SUN WARBLERS

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Pushcart Nomination: American Athenaeum, Front Porch Edition Spring 2013

Voice of Endangered Species

The animals and birds danced inside the core of the Earth, scorching their feet on hot-crusty rock, thirsting, chanting in the dark. They rested, and Thrasher heard the sea seep from the rim way above. He sang the song of two tiny warblers, those we call the prothonotaries today. “Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!”

The warblers shot like sparks from the core's crust, their eyes pulsing brightly black, seeing through dark. The male peered into a hole the way he still does every spring--the female looked too--the first-yellow glimmer glinted faintly down. *Swoosh*. Everyone had been waiting to rise from the stifling pit, hoping so long to live in free air. Now the warblers went up!

Everyone heard his song echo down, her wings flutter, rock break apart. He sang it open: she beat away dust. Thrasher followed. They all followed. The warblers burned their way up, flitting through cracks, and they came to a dark damp smell, rotten roots. They flew through a hollow-gray passage to a luminous hole. They could barely fit. The male poked his head through, and the sun rose, flooding river-water, bathing him—you see how bright his head and breast became, how his wings wear Dawn's blue shadow.

He found himself perched above a hole in a soggy-looking stump, the last of a dead river birch, the river itself meandering between cliffs made from the shells of old sea creatures, sand-colored and crusty, layered—north on the Mississippi, short of where spruce forests would grow.

Something growled massively. Ice moved down the valley as broadly as the river, thundering, burping air-holes. The female warbler came out, and Ice threw a cloud along the horizon, making the yellow on her head soft, the gray on her wings fade, the white on her belly dull. *The first birds in this world! River Sun warblers!*

Ice grew quiet as snow, and Thrasher did not hear him. Thrasher leaped out to a puddle, growing instantly. Thrasher had been smaller inside, like most everyone else, and he flapped gleefully, bathing, singing everyone out—the mud splattered the spots on his breast, froze, caught his bill, curved its tip.

Thrasher gurgled like water, and Wren bubbled a song, hurrying a trickle along the bank.

Thrasher wanted to gush a melody. Ice closed his bill. The notes grew cool, slow. Thrasher dribbled dry chips. Cowbird came out, walking the island, turning its dirt brown like her feathers.

“Chur-chur, Chur-wee,” sang Thrasher, and Bluebird brushed the air sky-blue.

“Chit-chit-chat-chatter,” sang Thrasher, and Tree Swallow dipped his wings in the river, shining it glossy blue.

The river valley was blue and brown, its colors before winter, but Thrasher did not notice. “Cheerily-cheerily-cheerily!” he sang. Robin flew out. “Whit-cheer, whit-cheer!” Cardinal came out. “Buzz!” Mosquito came out.

Bass, Catfish and Walleye squirmed out, slapping down the bank, flopping on ice. Thrasher blew a snort. Deer came out, slipped on ice. The River Suns sang, “Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat!” Ice dripped from the hole, mud thawed, and Thrasher unloosed his bill, pounded out double taps, tooted as if through tin.

Ivory-bill hammered ice from the hole, whitening the ice, and Thrasher bathed rapidly, singing ceaselessly, and all the birds flurried out. Mink, Rat, Mouse, Vole, Shrew swarmed from peeling bark. Turtles, frogs, alligators rose through the mud. Buffalo came out, and his hooves froze to river-ice.

“I will keep the game handy,” laughed Ice.

Buffalo lowered his horns, bellowing. His beard froze against ice, and he reared, tearing it, making it hang messily.

The River Suns perched on Buffalo's horns. “Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat!” Buffalo stomped free, and Ice blew splashes into sleet, matting Buffalo's fur, advancing a rumbling-white wall, catching Buffalo's tail, tearing it.

“Give me more!” cried River Sun.

Thrasher gave him more. River Sun sang louder, hotter. He raised his throat higher, brighter. Ice melted backward, and River Sun Woman flew to the base of his drips, spiraling, and the drips turned green—duckweed. “Who is Ice to take anyone's color?” she said. “How big is he? How strong?”

Ice frosted the duckweed. He blew a blizzard, sent the warblers fluttering backward, the animals scattering.

“I will freeze it all,” laughed Ice. “All the river, all the sea.” The Mississippi froze to its

mouth. The River Suns fled all along a curving coast, open water. They hid during days, catching bugs. They flew during nights, feeling Ice breathing down.

They finally got far enough and rested at the edge of a swamp. Sun shone upon an emerald surf, and they let the glitter pour into themselves, and Time turned as bright as his plumage. “I miss our stump,” she said.

“Let's do it now!” he said. “Not later! *Now!*”

She looked north, disinterested, and he pointed his bill at the sun: “Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!”

The sun traveled higher, and she turned her nape, warming it, preening it, and green light streamed out like tails of comets, glowing like sun dogs, pouring down like sun rays. You see her nape today, you see only a brush of olive. But jungles rose. River Sun sang, and mangroves grew, their winter home, and then the warblers flew toward Ice.

They passed above mud-clouds beneath the water along the coast and below the Mississippi's mouth. “Ice has been scraping the continent away,” said River Sun. “Even if we melt him, he will wash it all away.”

“Ice is not big or cold enough,” she said. “We will beat Ice.”

They flew low, she shed green, islands and marshes spread after them. The warblers saw a stump-hole at the mouth of a bayou. He clung to the rim, flashing stunning white tail-spots, and she bowed, lifted her rump, quivered wings. The two chipped frantically, warbled, twittered--green raced all the way up the bayou, sank roots up side creeks, crossed plains and mountains.

He bit her nape, mounting, and she pecked him off. “Ice,” she said.

They went on. She spilled green. The bald-cypress towered as if to touch them flying. Toots blew inside broad-sweeping forests--double taps--Ivory-bill. River Sun gleamed admirably at River Sun Woman. “Ivory-bill will live there forever against Ice.”

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They made green at every tributary—the Atchafalaya, the Arkansas, Yazoo, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin. Trees, flowers, vines—all the plants—rooted up every valley, sweeping to seashores.

The River Suns sang from holes and cracks in the sand-colored cliffs. Cedars and junipers

reached out. Oaks grew down to the bottoms. The warblers flew above their stump, seeing how Ice had pushed their islands around, trying to slow current. The River Suns greened their woods and hid in a dangling branch, eying their hole, and Bluebird perched atop the stump, singing as if he owned it.

“Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!” cried River Sun.

Bluebird stared down, dove for ants, flew to the hole. Chicks begged! Bluebird bent inside. River Sun sang louder, stretching his neck, swelling his nape.

“I wear the cold better than you,” said Bluebird. “I have more fire on my breast, so I can do it earlier.”

“Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat!” River Sun sang Bluebird to the ground, melting him to bones, and Bluebird Woman thudded down, spat upon by River Sun Woman, coughing in soupy-green slime. She parted her bill, gasped her last. Her featherless chicks squealed, leaping from the hole, flinching unopened eyes--Raccoon clawed one chick, Fox pounced upon another, Crow gulped one whole, and Mink carried two to her den.

The River Suns swooped into their hole, pecked the big sloppy nest, could not see. She struck his ankle: he stabbed her belly—their cavity was black, their hole too. They knocked each other, feeling their way up—the sky was dark, starless. The water shone blue but the sky did not. The morning star finally came. It passed. The day-air stayed dark. Their stump banged from collisions. Ducks quacked chaotically, ducklings peeped in panic, and night animals leaped into water, chomping them. Day birds wailed everywhere, bones crunching, and a chill descended, sinking into the River Suns. They fluttered down inside the cavity, fluffing closely together. They smelled Skunk.

“I feel Ice coming,” said Skunk. “Open up, or I will chew my way in.”

River Sun flew out. He hovered above the bluebirds, singing. “Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!” Bluebird's feathers returned, the slime fell from Bluebird Woman. The sky whitened. “You will be bigger, use larger-higher holes,” said River Sun.

The bluebirds woke. The sky deepened blue. Skunk squinted, waddling away beneath nettles.

“Bluebirds will brag less about wearing fire,” said River Sun, and the bluebirds' breasts rusted. “When you nest in woods, it will be deeper, harder for Skunk and Raccoon to see. The stump beside water is only for us.”

The Bluebirds flew farther into the woods.

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River Sun spun at his hole, flashed and flashed tail-spots, sang and sang. He tugged apart Bluebird's nest-stems, dropped them outside, emptied the stump-cavity. He perched on the rim, carrying a soft wad of moss--spongy, plump, green as the jungle. He sang raising the moss in his bill, chipping. He placed it inside, and she went in too. They burst out. They fluttered together on branches, bobbing brilliantly gold.

She saw where Ice had melted, and Flood had hung debris on logjams. She pulled out leaf-veins, leaf-bits, whole dead leaves, old seed-keys, old bark-bits. She carried them inside. She brought stem-fibers too wide for the hole and pushed them stubbornly inside. She brought in old webs, rootlets, more stem-fibers, puffballs. She lowered her belly, shaping her own cup, gleaming through the hole.

"I am over here!" River Sun sang from duckweed. "Catching gnats, catching flies!"

No answer.

"Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat!" A second male River Sun sang! Not loudly, secretly!

River Sun zoomed to the top of a buttonbush.

"*Now*, not later!" sang The Second, still secretly.

River Sun dove, singing his power, and Thrasher looked up, stopping him with his gold-rimmed eyes, his sheepish bill.

"Where is he?" asked River Sun.

"He flew," said Thrasher. "I cannot help myself." Thrasher whispered, "Chick-a-dee-dee-dee." A new male chickadee twirled on a stem. Thrasher chipped discretely like Cardinal. A female redbird raised her crest behind leaves. "I keep singing, making new birds."

"In hiding?" said River Sun. "Why not out loud?"

Thrasher glanced furtively down at Thrasher Woman sitting upon a gray-brown nest amid gray-brown stems.

The Second sang loudly, boldly. River Sun zoomed toward his stump. The Second sang from the dangling branch, fluffed himself cockily, sang toward the hole, "Again, again!"

River Sun streaked to The Second, pecked his breast, clawed his cheek. They locked bills and fell flapping down the face of the stump, and River Sun sang The Second into the dirt. He hopped and danced on the bare spot. He flew up to the branch-dangle and sang River Sun Woman out, and she lit beside him, looking over her shoulder, threading her bill into her rump, spreading her tail casually.

“His egg is inside me,” she said. “Will you feed another man's daughter--or kill her?”

River Sun hovered above the bare spot. “Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!”

The Second rose from the dirt.

“Feed her yourself!” cried River Sun. “Make her face irresistible, her rump wag prettily!”

“She will wag just as niftily as her mother!” cried The Second.

The two streaked down the bank. The Second spun on a second stump. River Sun Woman hurried past River Sun, slipped down into a hole. The males went in too. A second female screeched, hissed, bolted up. The River Suns bolted out. The two pairs streaked up and down banks, across sloughs, around stumps, up tree crowns. They strutted on bare branches, thrusting wings, snapping bills, and River Sun Woman turned toward home.

River Sun followed, feeling The Second behind him, then The Third. River Sun saw his stump, felt his power beat solely inside him. He left the other two behind. He swooped into the branch-dangle and sang indignantly toward The Second and Third, his head blazing fiercely.

When they returned home, he and River Sun Woman saw the hole in their stump seemed gone--closed up. A tail fanned out of it--cowbird-brown. They pecked it--the tail stayed there. River Sun Woman squeezed her head in--the tail stiffened.

“Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat!” sang River Sun. The rim started melting.

Each warbler bit a tail-corner, fluttered, tugged. They dropped exhausted, rested, went up again. They pulled again, and Cowbird dropped to the ground. She lay as if dead, *clever Cowbird*, and River Sun Woman went in.

River Sun stared down. Still Cowbird did not seem to breathe, even ants crawled upon her. He went in too.

River Sun Woman sat upon a brown speckled egg, blinking blissfully. “Our egg,” she sang. “Yours and mine. I feel the River Sun through the shell.”

River Sun flew out as Cowbird skulked away beneath nettles, flew up soundlessly, perched high in an oak, stared down at their hole. He took her silence into himself, flew branch-to-

branch, stood before her. “You do not build your own nest? Incubate your own eggs? Feed your own chicks?”

Cowbird shrugged, watching Thrasher Woman fly from her nest-bush.

“Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat!” sang River Sun.

Cowbird melted. Her remains fell through the air, blurring through green, falling into green. The dirt, trunks, bark-furrows, downfalls and upturned roots were green—no longer cowbird-brown.

River Sun Woman chipped loudly, rapidly—something dashed out their hole, yoke dripping down its chin. Thin. Furry. Mink was green, not brown.

“I could not see him!” cried River Sun Woman.

Brown Snake slithered green up their green stump.

River Sun hovered, singing above the forest floor, and Cowbird rose, the dirt brown again. She flew between trunks brown again, and he struck and bit her neck, rose with her above the river, looped high, dove snapping at her tail-butt, and she zigzagged up through oaks and above a river-cliff and out to a prairie.

Buffalo straightened his hind legs, and River Sun pecked her against a brown steaming pie.

“Cowbirds will live on dung beetles,” said River Sun. “They will stay beneath buffaloes' bellies, watching out for hooves, hiding in dust.”

“Shall I stomp her to death?” asked Buffalo.

“No, keep her with you—away from the woods.”

“I will try, but she has her right. She will want her own big herd, you know.”

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He swooped into his branch-dangle, River Sun Woman fluttering awkwardly below him. She landed in a low shrub, leaned as if to launch herself in, shot toward the hole, flapped in midair. He swooped his usual downward curve, squeezed his claws, gripped not the rim, only air. The hole--not there. The stump--chunks on the ground. The nest--disheveled on dirt.

“*Now!*” she sang. “I want to lay now, not later! *Now.*”

He flew to a bare-white cottonwood trunk, looked inside a new hole—a piece of duck-down lay on the floor, nothing else. He flashed his tail-spots from the rim, sang from a poison

ivy vine beside it. She flew in--he flew out--someone near the bank slurped something, crunching shells.

Raccoon sat between two little mud chimneys, sucking nest-stems from his nails, rolling them against his gums, spitting them out. Antennae poked out a chimney--a little lobster leftover from the sea, a crayfish. Raccoon picked it up daintily with his fingers, avoiding pincers. He chewed it with relish, fingered another, another, another, and River Sun clung upside-down to a trunk above him.

“Do not bother me, little bird.” Raccoon wagged his snout dismissively. “You think it was *your* stump, but what makes it so?” He spat crayfish shells and picked his teeth with a crayfish antenna. “I smelled yoke. I climbed, reached inside, felt nothing. I tore it open.”

River Sun sang. Raccoon melted beneath the song, his fur sinking between his bones.

“I am here, catching maggots!” sang River Sun.

River Sun Woman answered, “I am here, picking moss!”

River Sun flew to the cottonwood hole--an egg lay inside, moss tucked around the bottom. She tipped in above him, more moss in her bill. She piled it higher against the egg. “Moss will keep it moist during dry weather.”

He flew beside her to a moss-log, guarding against The Second. She swerved sharply, a red pincer squeezing her leg. She pumped wings, faltered, landed on mud. Crayfish came from chimneys all around her. River Sun melted them. The warblers rose. Nettles, moonseed, bedstraw fell--crayfish ate the plants, dead leaves below, ground-bugs. River Sun melted those crayfish--stumps cracked, thudding down. More crayfish climbed them, weighing them down. Vines slumped through treetops--crayfish swarmed grapes. The cottonwood scraped noisily--crayfish skittered toward the hole.

River Sun hovered above the fur and bones. “Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!”

Raccoon stepped upon one mud chimney and ate crayfish coming out the other.

“Thieves will wear masks,” said River Sun.

“Warblers will learn from me,” said Raccoon. “You will choose stumps by more than sentiment alone.”

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River Sun Woman sat on three eggs, and The Second, The Third, The Fourth flew by, and River Sun chased them and returned, and a glossy blue cape tipped at the hole, slipping inside. Tree Swallow gabbed fluidly in there, sweet-talking, and River Sun rushed in. Swallow had a wing draped around her, a sleek dark mask, a snow-white breast puffing out. “I put this duck-down in here,” he said. “I sang over it.” He slurred an indecipherable chatter--the duck-down rose--settled on River Sun Woman's cheek-- petted her of its own accord!

“You already have a hole higher in another tree,” said River Sun. “You see dragonflies better from it.”

Swallow jabbered—dragonflies flew inside the hole. River Sun Woman caught them readily, sitting on her eggs. Swallow crooned. A nest appeared beneath her. She eyed him in awe, shifting her rump.

“I own this hole too—in case Wind gets huffy with the other,” chattered Swallow. “But you and this pretty little lady can stay, and I will please her, and she will please me.”

“You will not fit!” cried River Sun Woman.

Swallow chattered her bigger, her rump higher, and River Sun struck Swallow's pulsing cheek, his vibrating throat, dashed out the hole, hid in the vine, waited. Swallow stayed inside. Swallow quivered atop her, telling her just how to shuffle. River Sun sang his power through the hole--an egg popped, its yoke sputtered. He dove at Swallow bobbing, rocking--Swallow dodged, batted River Sun against the wall—River Sun slumped, and Swallow jabbed his scalp, and she sang from her nest.

When you see River Sun Woman today, she rarely sings, “Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat!” But sometimes she must, and so, Swallow melted through the trunk. The cottonwood cracked. The top smashed down, and pieces flew up, and Eagle swooped, dangled a talon, rose with an egg, and Osprey took another.

“We cannot see fish anymore!” they shouted.

The sky shone blue: the water did not. Thrasher bobbed his bill above Swallow, imploring River Sun. “Re-do! Re-do!”

“Not him,” said River Sun. “Never.”

Thrasher sang River Sun to his buttonbush—Brown Snake slithered from brown water, no ripples showing. He slithered up gray-brown stems, and Thrasher Woman flushed, thrashing her wings through leaves. Brown Snake slid across her back, flicking his tongue toward eggs. Water

Snake wiggled mud-colored bands in brown water, lunged, clung to Thrasher Woman's throat. Thrasher pecked blindly at brown-wiggling-on-brown.

“Give Swallow less!” said River Sun.

“Will-do!” said Thrasher.

River Sun sang his power above Tree Swallow. Swallow flitted away instantly. Water Snake wiggled beige bands with brown, and Thrasher pecked, drawing blood. Thrasher Woman flapped freely. Brown Snake rippled slightly, Thrasher Woman dove, he fled into water.

Swallow lit on the buttonbush, gulping glittering-lacy wings. “The water is not what it was. It stayed half-brown. It restored only half-blue.”

“Muddy, too-muddy,” said Thrasher.

“Ice!” said River Sun Woman. “He hides where the river starts!”

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The River Suns flew where Ice had pushed the river-cliffs farther apart, had leveled hills, had left arctic boulders—where water ran gravelly, and banks were bare. They greened things, and Sun stayed up longer, helping, setting later, and the warblers slipped into a stump-hole. They slept. They woke shivering at dawn, and Wren Woman hurried their shaking, burbling cold, watery notes outside.

Wren Woman piled sticks across trickles on new green banks, backed creeks into lakes, sang her dams open, gurgled giggles as mud flowed, and gullies turned wren-brown.

Wren Woman sang a bubbling, cold wind rippling south, and the River Suns muscled their way against it, Wren Woman laughing, twirling easily atop stump-holes, snag-holes, branch-holes, trunk-holes.

The warblers made green at the Rum River's mouth, and Wren Woman rattled like a diamondback, vibrating tail-bars.

“Old maid!” cried River Sun.

“No, I dislike my man. I do it with Ice. He makes me holes up here.”

The River Suns raised fir, pine, scrub-aspen, alder swamps--the river turned creek-sized, bending like hairpins. The warblers raised bog-willow--Wren Woman heckled from a stump, diving at their napes. River Sun whirled, chasing her back to the stump, and then the warblers

followed several bends, raising tamarack, and Wren Woman hissed, snapping at their breasts. River Sun chased her to the same stump, the river curving around its opposite side, swinging farther south, looping back, forth, back again.

“Let us skip these banks, fly straight to Lake Itasca,” said River Sun.

“No.” River Sun Woman flew round and round, greening endless sinuous banks.

The warblers spent many days winding north, and they arrived feeling dizzy. The Mississippi bubbled so narrowly from Lake Itasca that Moose stepped across it effortlessly, but River Sun Woman hung her head, her nape exhausted, entirely gray--a gray-gravelly plain still stretched endlessly north, fanning east and west.

“You flew too far!” Wren Woman flicked her tail triumphantly from a gnarled gray stump. “You will not live among evergreens like me!” She sang clouds into the stream. “You are dying!”

“Yes,” lisped River Sun Woman.

“No!” cried River Sun. “We have reached the source!”

The air cooled, rumbled, darkened. A thundercloud billowed, roiling nape-green.

“Ice is the source!” boomed Ice. “Ice starts the lake! Ice starts the river! Ice starts the sea! Ice starts the spring! Ice stops them all!”

Ice spat sleet, and River Sun beat wings stiffly upward and hovered like a tiny yellow leaf-speck before a tornado-top, singing against Ice. Lightning flashed. River Sun brightened, sang louder, hotter. Thunder clapped. Hail-pieces flew into River Sun's throat—big as gooseberries. He spat them, was pummeled by hail the size of spruce cones. He plummeted, thumping against frozen glazed sticks. He lay slipping into a freezing beaver dam, River Sun Woman lying face down beside him, her wings spread limply against sticks, icing, stiffening outwardly.

Sleet came again, dripping beneath feathers, and River Sun sang, “Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!” Her gray wings slowly flexed. Her head slowly rose. Her eyes slowly opened.

The warblers flew into the hole of the gnarled-gray stump, descended to a pile of twigs, and Wren butted the sticks from below. “Wren Woman sang me sexily in here! Buried me! Left!”

Wren Woman cackled, tipping in the hole, dropping ice-glazed twigs. They fell as numerously as snowflakes, and River Sun cracked them, singing heat, flying up, and Wren Woman gurgled downward, hurrying their melt-water. He drove her out, River Sun Woman hacking frantically below him, Wren flap-splashing desperately.

Ice-darts pelted down outside. Wren Woman laughed from a spruce, darting beneath a bough. River Sun flew into the tree, and it rocked violently, slapping the ground, swaying from Ice's howl.

Wren Woman flitted amid boughs, hiding, and a little bird flashed, and River Sun sang at it. He stopped—Blackpoll clung to a dry branch.

“Yes, melt him!” Wren Woman called invisibly. “Look at his cap, the color of black-ice! He makes Ice!”

But Blackpoll Woman emerged on a bough, slurping a spruce worm from a green needle, her plumage flushing green.

River Sun sang Wren Woman against the trunk, melting her all the way into it. The spruce stood still. Silence suddenly muffled River Sun. The Mississippi stopped gurgling, stopped bubbling. Sleet stopped slashing. The heavy dead quiet of Ice pervaded from everywhere.

“Ice is bigger than you think,” said Blackpoll. “Stronger.”

River Sun flew to the stump. Ice filled the hole and stump-cavity. River Sun Woman lay clearly frozen inside, her golden spirit rising through ice. He sang, “Heat-heat-heat-heat-heat-heat!” Drips pooled--did not run--froze again. He pecked little frozen cracks, singing—Ice neither dripped nor chipped. River Sun Woman remained breathless, motionless—her spirit continued to ascend half-frozen. He sang down against it—it kept rising.

River Sun returned to the spruce. “Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!”

Wren Woman came out, flustering her wings, scolding him, “River Sun warblers will sing only air! *No heat! No cheat!*”

“Wrens will sing only air! No running water! No wind! No clouds!”

River Sun sang at the stump-hole, his voice indeed without heat. He sang as if loudness alone could break Ice, and Blackpoll heard *his* song--a second male blackpoll?

“Seet-seet-seet-seet-seet-seet-seet-seet!”

The Blackpolls flew around the stump, and motes of evergreen poured through sunbeams beneath their wings. They chased Ice. They made evergreen west to the Arctic Sea, north to Hudson Bay, east to the Labrador and Atlantic. If you disbelieve it, follow blackpolls some year. Their napes and backs remain flushed green. They start on the Amazon, fly up the Mississippi. When they sing, you think they're River Suns. They get past the River Sun's documented breeding range, they fly their ancient evergreen route. They nest in spruce nearly to Barrow, fly

back across Canada, turn south down the Atlantic.

Or watch Wren. He remains vengeful. He sings Wren Woman into his hole, hisses, zooms around to girlfriends in side-stumps.

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Ice gushed melting from the stump's base. The stump toppled. River Sun Woman floated out, her feathers drenched, frozen to her flesh, all gray, her golden spirit nowhere.

“Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!” sang River Sun. She lay still, his song indeed without power.

River Sun billed her wingtip, fluttered backward, dragged her onto the stump. He lay his head on her breast, thought he felt her song pulse faintly inside her. He pecked ice from her bill and nostrils. He slid his belly-feathers warmly upon her, and the stump bobbed and floated into thawing rapids.

She lay gray-on-gray, the stump rounding the sinuous curves sluggishly, and River Sun flew beneath overhanging bank-bushes, chipping to her, eyeing wing-shadows above the leaves.

The water glistened clearly, eddying silver and copper, reflecting gold cusps, yellow wind-riffles, dawn-rose, pink, mauve, myriad greens, glossy blues, twilight plums. The light bounced and played across her. The river widened, the sun climbed. A golden wedge glittered into her, mornings. Heat penetrated, mid-days. An amber wedge glittered, evenings.

Her head yellowed, her nape greened. “I will die by my old stump,” she said.

“I am here, catching you caddis-flies!” called River Sun.

“Haw-har!” Crow strutted on the stump, bobbing above her. River Sun streaked above him, spiraled, ruffled Crow's neck. Crow snapped. River Sun shot to a bank-bush, flapped loudly branch-to-branch, fell crookedly. Crow chased him directly—*thump!* Falcon held Crow on mud, squeezing with talons, glaring at chicks high on a cliff-ledge. Falcon called his chicks down. River Sun flew to the stump. He pressed spider webs around River Sun Woman's head, moss upon her yellow feathers, and then she looked merely like an old-gray stump with a pale-green moss spot, not carrion.

He waited until night-dusk and dawn-dusk and slipped beneath the moss-spot, feeding her.

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The stump bumped against gray-brown stems just below a gray-brown nest, the slough-water a little high from thunder and ice storms up north. Thrasher looked over his shoulder hastily, a grub in his bill.

“My power is gone,” said River Sun.

“I heard from here.” Thrasher bent to Thrasher Boy gaping above the nest-rim. “All of us lost it. We only brought so much from below. When--”

“More!” Thrasher Boy poked up a frowzy head. “Give me more!”

“Hush, wait.” Thrasher studied River Sun Woman lying on the stump. “When the first birds lost it, every bird lost it.”

Thrasher Boy neither heard nor noticed. He peered down at the River Suns, her subtle radiance! His dashing blaze! Thrasher Boy caught his breath and chipped urgently. “I am here, River Sun Mama! A mayfly, please! A moth!”

Leaves slightly shook--River Sun Girl quivered fluffy-mottled wings beside the stump.

River Sun Woman suddenly stood, suddenly flapped. She suddenly hovered beneath a leaf. She suddenly stabbed a mayfly. “I am over here, catching fledgling-food!”

“I am over here, doing the same!” cried River Sun.

Thrasher Boy resumed his begging, apparently singing no more new fledglings into being. But these days River Suns still fatten chicks—and themselves—the same way. They glean bugs from leaves until one day a head brushes a cottonwood or river birch, leaves yellow, and the Mississippi cools, gleaming with morning mist. The river-cliffs brighten red and orange, and then grow bare. But the trees in the bottoms remain softly yellow like River Sun Woman, brushed by River Suns moving south. Ice creeps quietly into slough-edges, and still the yellows linger. The yellows finally drop. They imprint their veins into Ice, bleed stains into Ice, release River Sun's echoes deep inside Ice's trembling. They remind Ice all winter—if you linger by river-stumps too long during spring, you might hear their power return, their heat.