



## Alabama Law Scholarly Commons

---

Articles

Faculty Scholarship

---

2007

### The Lawyer Speaks of Rivers for RFK, Jr. Poem

Jean Stefancic

*University of Alabama - School of Law*, [jstefancic@law.ua.edu](mailto:jstefancic@law.ua.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/fac\\_articles](https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/fac_articles)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Jean Stefancic, *The Lawyer Speaks of Rivers for RFK, Jr. Poem*, 37 *Envtl. L.* xxi (2007).

Available at: [https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/fac\\_articles/332](https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/fac_articles/332)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Alabama Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of Alabama Law Scholarly Commons.

# POEM

## THE LAWYER SPEAKS OF RIVERS

*For RFK, Jr.*

BY  
JEAN STEFANCIC\*

I waited,  
like the others,  
wondering what he would say.

And then,  
he spoke of rivers!  
He spoke, not of the father of waters,  
the great Mississippi dividing the country in two,  
but of the mother of Eastern waters,  
discovered by Verrazano and bearing Hudson's name.  
A mistaken passage to the northwest,  
connected upward to the Indian sky  
by a lake called Tear of the Clouds.  
And reaching inland,  
fed by spillways, thundering falls,  
past the Mohawk and Erie Canal,  
to the Great Lakes  
and seaway of Saint Lawrence,  
inward to the middle of the continent.  
Some small stream.  
He spoke of a river,  
and I, not knowing,  
listened.

---

\* Research Professor of Law & Derrick Bell Scholar, University of Pittsburgh School of Law.

He spoke of a river:  
estuary, tidal, fresh, and salt,  
spawning hundreds of species of fish,  
a Noah's ark of the ichthyan world.  
I did not know  
that carp are monster children  
of glittering goldfish  
planted one hundred fifty years ago  
by Chinese settlers.  
I did not know  
that striped bass in West Coast streams  
descend from Hudson River ancestors  
transplanted, after  
gold silt stirred up by the panners  
caused an indigenous disaster,  
killing all the salmon.

I could only recall  
from childhood's early days  
news bulletins from Hyde Park,  
and Rip van Winkle mixed up in it too.  
And once I saw the New Jersey Palisades  
from the expressway past Bear Mountain.  
And many years later  
I recognized the Northeast forest  
in the Hudson River landscape school.

But, no, I never thought of what was in the water.

He spoke of acid rain and nitrates in the snow melt.  
I did not know  
the bottom of Long Island Sound looked like black mayonnaise.  
He spoke of sewage spilt untreated into the watery  
arteries of the Northeast.  
I did not know  
a Beluga whale is the most polluted mammal on earth.  
He spoke of harvesting dead crabs on the ocean side of Manhattan.  
And did you know  
that porpoises swim to Albany,  
and sea horses to Poughkeepsie?

He spoke of the river and a river-keeper.  
I did not know  
a man could spend his days patrolling,  
testing the waters for chemical drip,  
spying on tankers discharging jet fuel.

2007]

*THE LAWYER SPEAKS OF RIVERS*

next to the water supply of New York,  
watching them steal fresh water  
to take to dry-docked Aruba.  
He spoke of skeet shooting over the river  
with lead pellets labeled toxic to hogs,  
the splintered targets immersed in drinking water  
as lethal as the bullets that shattered them.

We did not know those things.  
And I marveled at his own replete survival.

May 4, 2007

\*\*\*