

The River Next Door

Valerie Coffin Price

Artist

Abstract This is a tale of the river Taff, in south Wales, as seen and experienced by an artist and a poet. Through the use of sketchbooks and poetic journals as a form of research in the field, the artist Valerie Coffin Price and poet Philip Gross produced work which lead to the publication *A Fold in the River* (2015). In this visual essay the artist will shine a light on the collaborative processes of working with a poet, the river and the language of place. The book is therefore not only a collaboration between poet and artist, but between the artist, the poet and the river.

Keywords Drawing. Walking. Poetry. Landscape. Sketchbooks. Literature. Wales. River Taff.



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Figure 1 V.C. Price, *A River Next Doors* sketchbook. 2013. Mixed media.
Artists own collection, © V.C. Price

This is not a visual description of the eco-health of a river, nor is it to do with resilience or vulnerability, although it may reflect aspects of all of these. It is the story of one artist and one poet responding to one river in Wales, the river Taff, and to each other's work and ways of working. This creative focus brings a distinctive viewpoint, sensitive to the changing life and presence of the river itself.

Through the artistic use of sketchbooks as a form of research in the field the artist Valerie Coffin Price and poet Philip Gross produced work which led to the publication of *A Fold in the River* in 2015. In this visual essay the artist will shine a light on the collaborative processes of working with a poet, the river and the language of place.

The choice of the river Taff was based on the lived experience of both artist and poet, a river that is central to the book and our lives. Philip Gross used to live on the banks of the river Taff, in the heart of the South Wales Valleys, while Valerie Coffin Price works within sight of the river in Cardiff Bay. It is a source of inspiration to both.

The river Taff, running through one of the South Wales mining valleys, is emblematic of the area, both in its brief historical importance and its damage. As in many industrial areas a river would have been of central importance to the development of industry, just as the South Wales Valleys and the river Taff, for a period, became a driver of the industrial revolution in Britain. Cardiff, now the capital of Wales, was built on the fortunes of the Valleys and its coal and iron industries. The river therefore changed from a rural river, to industrial artery, to

a polluted and unappealing watercourse in the post-industrial period and, more recently, to a clean and rejuvenated resource inhabited by trout, salmon, otters and dippers.

The opening sequence in the book, *The River Next Door*, speaks from a direct, close-up experience of the river in its multiple forms: the “ever changing water music” coexisting with the “plastic tidewrack” of detritus. In the image transfer technique of the visual work, as in the poems, the creative process itself offers a metaphor of the river’s history, with something of beauty emerging out of damage. This should not so much reassure us as alert us to the inadequacy of human judgements in the face of this complexity (Gross, Price 2015, 16).

Using walking and drawing as a research method, the artist walked the length of the river Taff, from sea to source during 2013, travelling from Cardiff, where the river Taff meets the Severn Estuary, to its source in the Brecon Beacons. These episodic walks took place over a period of a year allowing time for reflection and production in-between times. The artist’s use of folding concertina sketchbooks as part of the research highlights her “process of being in conversation with the river, the journey, the landscape and the poetry”, layering elements of imagination, language, image and place. Jeremy Hooker describes this process as “a three-way collaboration, between a poet, a painter and a river” (Hooker 2015).

Both artist and poet are naturally drawn to rivers but use the fluid, marginal riverine spaces to explore subtly different aspects of their work. Bodies of water – rivers, seas, wetlands and estuaries – have been active presences in Gross’ poetic work since the prize-winning collection *The Water Table* (2009), inspired by the Severn Estuary, of which the river Taff is a tributary. In this case, Philip Gross was searching for a sense of his place in the South Wales Valleys, something he did through writing about the exact place where he was. In the process he was also positioning himself within the culture and history of the Taff valley, as reflected in the river, while Valerie Coffin Price, as well as occupying a studio near the confluence of the river Taff and the Severn Estuary, has a more physical relationship to the river, as a sculler of more than 20 years. The project therefore allowed her to explore the changing faces of the river over its entire length of 42 miles.

Both have a history of collaboration, from Gross’ work with Simon Denison on *Eye Spy Pinhole Eye* (2009), a book length examination of the concrete footings of pylons located in the Taff valley to my own work with artist Mary Husted from 2000 to 2006, this project grew out of a joint engagement with wetlands, *Thinking Like a Wetland* (2013). Both *Thinking Like a Wetland* and *A Fold in the River* involved a creative conversation: the give and take, not of two different but equal works, made in parallel, but the kind of collaboration whereby two artforms, not unlike two waters, flowed into each other forming a new, independent entity.

of river and words. The fact that the river Taff has been damaged, transformed and partly healed was what made it a compelling subject for both artists, its ambiguity and sense of having its own distinctive and powerful life behind our understanding of it. There is nothing which is unspoilt about the river, giving it its distinctive and extraordinary qualities: the writing and the 'spoiled' image of the artwork reflect the damage and the mercurial nature of the river.



Figure 2 V.C. Price, *Voices of the River*. 2015. Mixed media. Gross, Price 2015, 22-3.
Poetry by P. Gross, © V.C. Price

The Water Table

All summer it lazed
 on its stone-bed - half
the autumn too. Rain barely stirs it. Only

up, under the hills,
 in the dark long (centuries-
long) hall weight shifts, the water table

being laid: the not-
 yet-woken guests'
cups fill, are filled, are running over. Then

the day. A meadhall
 clamour. Rain sheets
off the fields, the glistening flanks. It spills

into present-time, smells
 sour, knows no bounds,
remembers too much and will not be stilled.
(Gross, Price 2015, 7)

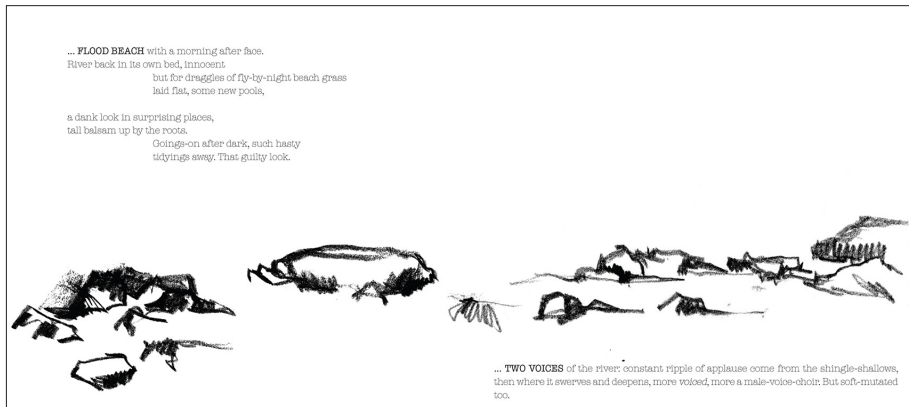


Figure 3 V.C. Price, *Flood Beach*. 2015. Charcoal. Gross, Price 2015, 24-5.
Poetry by P. Gross, © V.C. Price

There is no simple transformation or translation between art forms and their differences. There is, however, space: the space between one body of work and the other, where the creative shift happens. It is this shift, in perspective, in ways of working that comes from seeing 'physical artists at work' or poets sifting words, which leads to the open door through which one steps into new ventures and future collaborations.

WHY SHOULD YOU EXPECT it to smile for you, this river? Grow up. New rains, a half-metre rise, the Taff is murky, greenish-grey and tetchy – a sour smell too, slightly chemical, slightly tinged with mould. It's an unlovely river today, the last leaves falling, everything as naked as you've seen it. That's naked, not nude – there's nothing posed about it, or alluring, in its least-best angle, with its uncleared rubbish too. Unlovely, it doesn't say Love me. Yet you do. (Gross, Price 2015, 94)



Figure 4 V.C. Price, *Two Flows*. 2015. Mixed media. Gross, Price 2015, 50-3.
Poetry by P. Gross, © V.C. Price

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