

RIVER STANZAS
E M E R G E



Wick Poetry Center
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In Better Health

by Dan Bobkoff

Forty years ago today, a spark flew from a train crossing a low bridge over the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland. That spark ignited oil-soaked debris in the water. The river burned, and that fire helped to ignite the environmental movement. Randy Newman wrote the song, “Burn On,” and the environmental movement found a new symbol. Forty years later, the Cuyahoga is a very different river. It teams with fish and wildlife.

Even today, tell someone you live in Cleveland, and invariably you’ll hear: Doesn’t your river catch on fire? Nevermind that in the middle of the 20th century, rivers in industrial cities across the country caught on fire all the time. Nevermind it’s been four decades since the Cuyahoga’s infamous blaze that only lasted about a half hour. That image of a sludge and oil-filled river on fire persists. But today’s river could not be more different.

What they’re finding today are dozens of kinds of fish, from red horses to steelhead. And another good sign: Many of the fish they find hate pollution. In the early 1980s, when they started keeping track, parts of this river were so polluted that virtually nothing could survive. Many of these same sections are now rated as exceptional for fish habitat. Some parts of the river near Akron still have problems with sewage and runoff, but in much of the Cuyahoga, beavers, herons and even bald eagles thrive. It’s a remarkable transformation.

from *Ohio’s Burning River In Better Health 40 Years Later* by Dan Bobkoff, All Things Considered, National Public Radio (June 22, 2009).