

# MAKING PEACE WITH THE HIGHWOOD RIVER: ONE YEAR IN CONTEMPLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHS AND FLOWS

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## ABSTRACT:

Since the 2013 Alberta floods, my relationship with the Highwood River has been changing. Before the disaster, I had taken the power of the river for granted. Then, the floodwaters ravaged the community of High River—my home. In the time after the flood, I engaged in a study of place as part of a course in *Holistic Approaches to Life and Living* led by Elder, Bob Cardinal of the Maskekosiik Enoch Cree Nation. I observed the flows through my camera lens: visiting and re-visiting the river, observing the seasonal changes, forming a stronger connection to my place in the community, and healing from the disaster that impacted my life in immeasurable ways. Please join me on the berm, to contemplate the ebbs and flows of water over time and place, with our more-than-human relatives as they present themselves in quiet moments.

## BIO:

Jennifer Markides is a graduate student in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. She is an educator, writer, photographer, and member of the Métis Nation. She lives in High River, Alberta with her husband and their two sons. Her SSHRC funded doctoral research explores the stories of youth living through the aftermath of the 2013 Alberta floods. She uses arts-based research to communicate with diverse audiences towards consciousness raising and action. She sees storytelling as an emancipatory act. Through the lens of her camera, she documents and reflects on the changes in her community.

## Overlooking the River

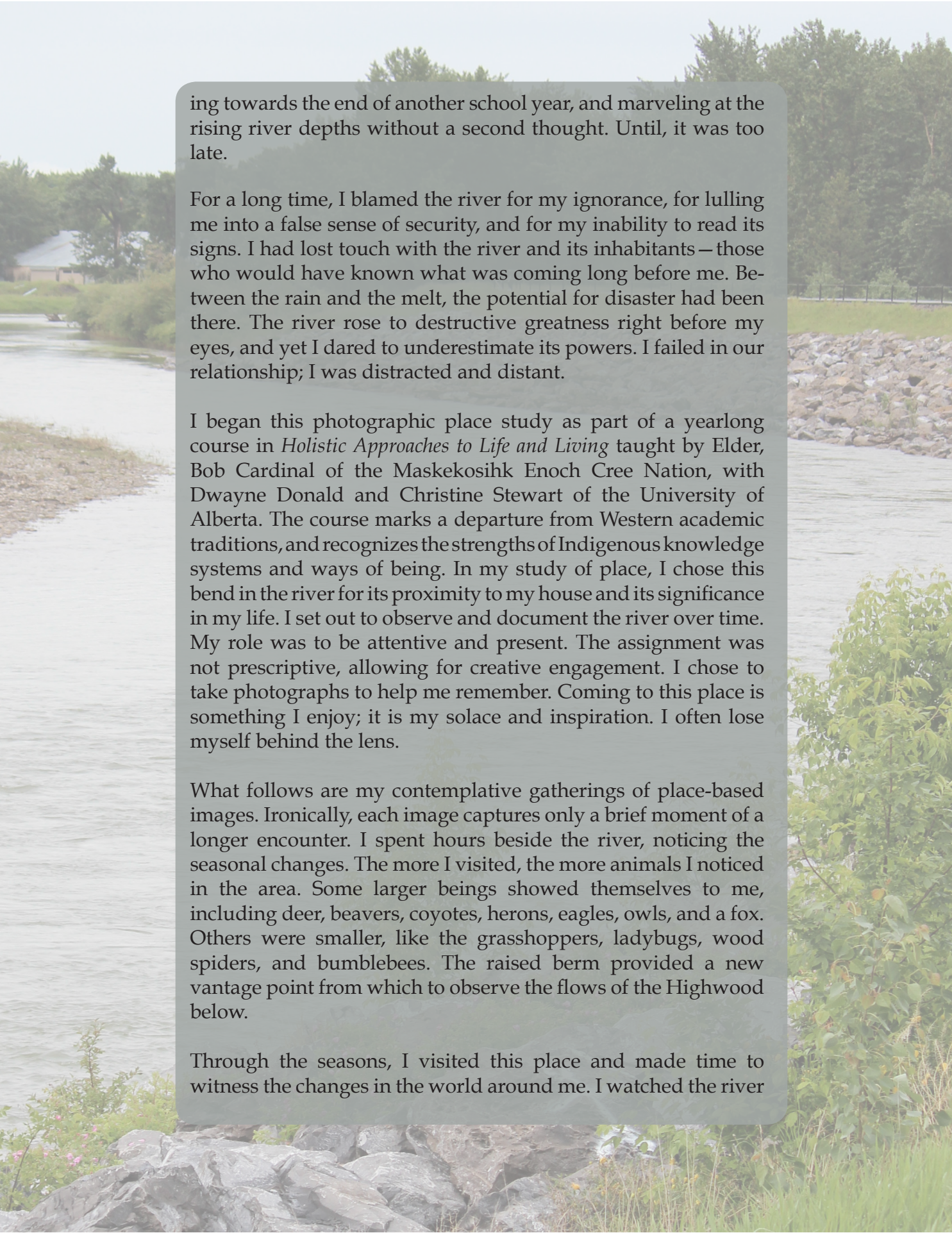
The Highwood River divides the town of High River into north and south. In June 2013, the river overflowed its banks and besieged our community for nearly two weeks. While the waters eventually receded, the town is still recovering today. The flood has left its mark on our community—a layer of sediment that cannot be washed away.

After the previous berm failed to keep the waters out, a new berm was constructed by adding earth and stone, width and height to the old one. This raised embankment is the barrier between the river and the southwest, where I live. In places where people once

had views to the river, we can now view into their homes from the newly paved pathway along the top of the berm.

The flood represents a turning point in my life: from stability to turmoil. It is the focus of my graduate research and the impetus for my ongoing healing. The river betrayed my trust. It violated my home, my neighbourhood, and my town. It is easy for me to personify and vilify the river, for I did not heed its warnings. The water levels were high that June, higher than I had ever seen them before, but that did not concern me. I went about my days: driving into the city, teach-





ing towards the end of another school year, and marveling at the rising river depths without a second thought. Until, it was too late.

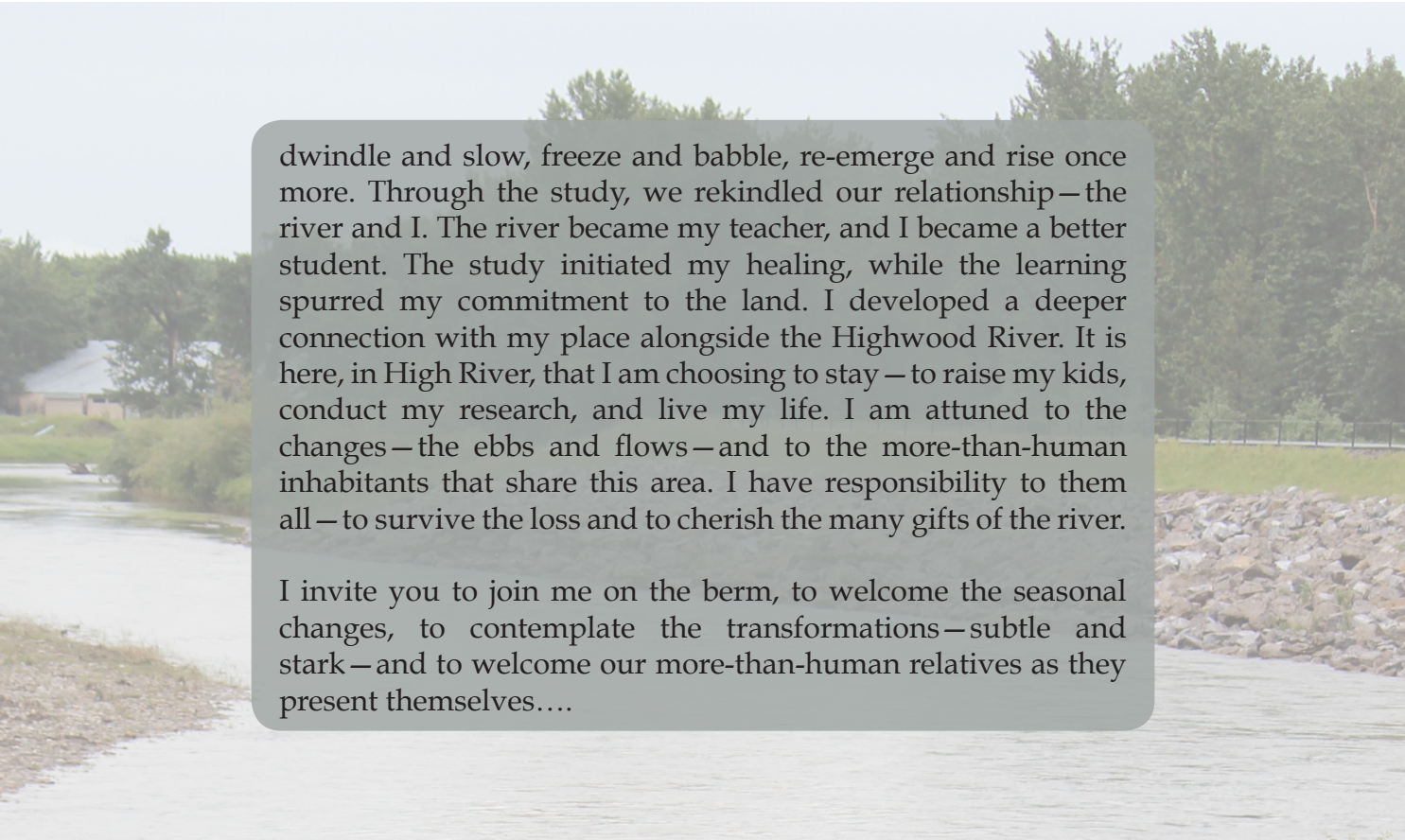
For a long time, I blamed the river for my ignorance, for lulling me into a false sense of security, and for my inability to read its signs. I had lost touch with the river and its inhabitants – those who would have known what was coming long before me. Between the rain and the melt, the potential for disaster had been there. The river rose to destructive greatness right before my eyes, and yet I dared to underestimate its powers. I failed in our relationship; I was distracted and distant.

I began this photographic place study as part of a yearlong course in *Holistic Approaches to Life and Living* taught by Elder, Bob Cardinal of the Maskekosihk Enoch Cree Nation, with Dwayne Donald and Christine Stewart of the University of Alberta. The course marks a departure from Western academic traditions, and recognizes the strengths of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being. In my study of place, I chose this bend in the river for its proximity to my house and its significance in my life. I set out to observe and document the river over time. My role was to be attentive and present. The assignment was not prescriptive, allowing for creative engagement. I chose to take photographs to help me remember. Coming to this place is something I enjoy; it is my solace and inspiration. I often lose myself behind the lens.

What follows are my contemplative gatherings of place-based images. Ironically, each image captures only a brief moment of a longer encounter. I spent hours beside the river, noticing the seasonal changes. The more I visited, the more animals I noticed in the area. Some larger beings showed themselves to me, including deer, beavers, coyotes, herons, eagles, owls, and a fox. Others were smaller, like the grasshoppers, ladybugs, wood spiders, and bumblebees. The raised berm provided a new vantage point from which to observe the flows of the Highwood below.

Through the seasons, I visited this place and made time to witness the changes in the world around me. I watched the river





dwindle and slow, freeze and babble, re-emerge and rise once more. Through the study, we rekindled our relationship—the river and I. The river became my teacher, and I became a better student. The study initiated my healing, while the learning spurred my commitment to the land. I developed a deeper connection with my place alongside the Highwood River. It is here, in High River, that I am choosing to stay—to raise my kids, conduct my research, and live my life. I am attuned to the changes—the ebbs and flows—and to the more-than-human inhabitants that share this area. I have responsibility to them all—to survive the loss and to cherish the many gifts of the river.

I invite you to join me on the berm, to welcome the seasonal changes, to contemplate the transformations—subtle and stark—and to welcome our more-than-human relatives as they present themselves....



**Fall Leaves River Bend - August 2016**





**Kingbirds of a Feather – August 2016**



**Man and River 1 – August 2016**



**Dark and Light River Bend – September 2016**





**Family Portrait - November 2016**



**Red Tips River Bend - November 2016**





**Man and River 2 - November 2016**



**Precarious Perch - November 2016**



**Blue Sky River Bend - February 2017**





**Grey Sky River Bend - March 2017**



**Ducks Landing at Sunset - April 2017**





**Home Renovations - April 2017**



**Sky Blue Jay - April 2017**



**Leafless River Bend - May 2017**





**Man and River 3 - May 2017**



**Camouflage - May 2017**



**Eagle Feathered Friend - June 2017**





**Heron Blue Clouds - June 2017**



**Man and River 4 - June 2017**



**Man and River 5 - June 2017**





**Golden Grasses River Bend - June 2017**



**Man and River 6 - June 2017**



**Catch of the Day - June 2017**





**Stormy Clouds River Bend - June 2017**



**Cry of the King Fisher - June 2017**



**Camouflage 2 - July 2017**





**Mid-Summer River Bend - July 2017**

