

OCTOBER 1985 • \$1.50

YANKEE



THE COLORS OF THE RIVER

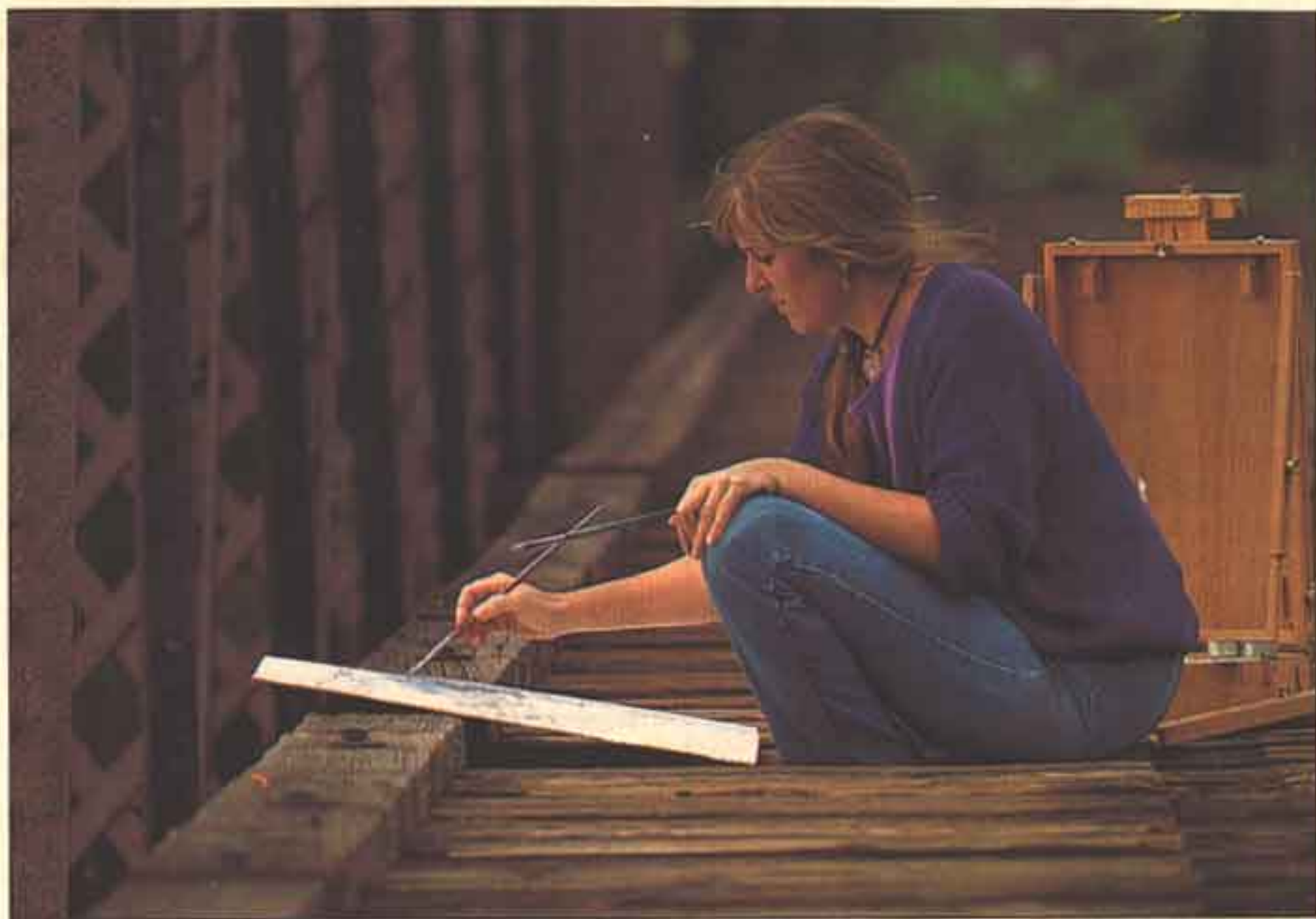
(continued)

to pull down the rutted dirt drive that led to it but was stopped by a mean, hand-scrawled sign: PAY 25¢ OR KEEP OUT. A quarter didn't seem like a lot to see the falls, but I thought about the Indians and I turned around and crossed the bridge to the other side of the river where I found a similar spot, a corner cut out of someone's cornfield. Here the river was free, and I got out of the car and walked down to the water and felt the cold air come at me, turned up by the rushing water. Men with poles were fishing for shad from two good-sized motorboats that were anchored in the middle of the river. They were as close to the whitewater as they could get, the anchor lines as tight as guitar strings, the boats bucking, straining to be cut loose.

THAT NIGHT I STAYED AT A MOTEL in Springfield on Riverdale Street, so named, I imagined, because of the river. But there was no presence there. The only window in the room looked out across the parking lot to a forest of blazing signs, and traffic whined and squealed and grunted all night long out on the road close by. The next morning I went out to look for the river, just to make sure it was really there. I drove down blind alleys and into parking lots that ended in trees. At last, at the far end of a vacant lot, I did find the river behind a row of dumpsters and up and over an earthen dike. I stood and watched it: the dead color of an old oil rag, it skulked past without a sound.

FROM A CANOE THE RIVER SPEAKS more loudly. I was with Jamie Young, an artist with a penchant for painting the river. She had come out in this late afternoon light to get the river from yet another angle. We had put the canoe in just above the Calvin Coolidge Bridge in Northampton and were heading upstream, past Elwell Island.

Jamie, who is 31, grew up in Longmeadow, a river town just south of Springfield, in the same house her great-grandmother



Jamie Young, painting the river from her favorite spot, an abandoned rail trestle that crosses the river between Hadley and Northampton, Mass. (Right) One of her paintings.



bought back in the twenties, a large estate with land that stretched all the way down to the river. Over the years they sold a strip to the railroad and a strip to the highway and a chunk of it was given to the Audubon bird sanctuary. In grade school and junior high, Jamie and her brothers spent a lot of time down at the river. "It was really, really dirty back then. We never swam in the river, but we used to fish just for fun. We never caught anything edible — it was just to catch. It smelled. Sometimes in the

middle of the summer we'd start walking towards it and we'd get within an eighth of a mile and it would be so bad we'd turn around and go home. A lot of the time we'd go down and there'd be dead fish floating by, belly up, all along the shore. Still, it always had its power. I was unconscious of it at first. You could see the river from the window on the third floor of my parents' house. I painted it from there the first time, when I was still in high school."

Jamie moved out and got married when

THE COLORS OF THE RIVER

(continued)

she was 18 and spent a dozen years living in places as near as New Hampshire — still close enough so that she could see the river from the top of a knoll near her cabin — and as far as Alaska and California. But a couple of years ago she moved back, settling in Northampton in a house behind which the river runs. When she came back, divorced, with three young children, she found that one thing that took her away from some of the pressures of being a single parent was her painting. She has painted not only the river but also its backwaters and its tributaries and the big oxbow that coils around Northampton. Her paintings work color into the river like a blessing. Even the river, frozen in February, has a brilliance of reds and yellows coming from the sun just passing across the surface of the ice before it disappears.

Jamie works from sketches done out in the field and from memory. To get to the river, wearing her easel like a backpack, she has vaulted barbed-wire fences, walked across acres of cornfield, and waded out onto sandbars. She has set up her easel on bridges and at the edge of I-91. Her early paintings of the river show trees in the foreground, the river flowing in the distance. “I realized one day that the trees were in the way. It was as if I was painting from behind bars. I knew then that I was painting at too much of a distance.”

To give herself a better chance, she fixed up an old sailboat — painted it blue with a white stripe at the waterline — and rigged it so she could go out on the river and paint. “This is what I’ve needed,” she said. “I could never seem to get close enough to the river. I’d go down roads that looked as if they led to it, but then when I’d get down there, the views were a big disappointment. In the boat, I can choose my spot.”

The day I went to see her, the boat was not quite ready for the season so we went out instead in a canoe. Paddling upstream at first didn’t seem much more difficult than working our way across a lake, but

after the first bend the surface of the water took on tension and we dug in a little deeper. “It’s probably two miles. Not far,” she said as we struggled to get into a rhythm with each other’s strokes and with the pull of the river.

“That’s it,” she said as we went around another bend. We were moving toward an island, a forested island that rose straight up out of the river like an ocean ship or a green-haired river goddess, hair on end. “It’s even better than I thought it would be,” she said, paddling harder. The sun was getting lower, the light angling flat against the fine spring-green of the willows. We passed into a crosscurrent that rippled and tossed, and the wind passed quickly across the waves, which were running upstream, tipping them white. “Just a little farther,” she said, and when we reached the angle of light she wanted, I turned around and dropped the anchor which flew out into the water as if something beneath the surface had grabbed it. The line, tied to the center thwart, squiggled out after it in a fury and finally bit tight. The boat held, crosswise to the current, and we sat, facing each other, jostling like commuters on an old train racing along at high speed.

Jamie picked from under her seat one of the three boards she had brought, and from her paint box she brought up a palette — five colors and white — which she had planned out before she left. Her brush went steadily across the board. She did not seem to notice the suck of the river.

“During the winter I got into doing fast sketches and painting more out of my head — simply because of the weather. It was so cold I couldn’t stay out that long. And now that the weather is warmer, I have to readjust to being out here longer and not paint every detail that I see.

“I get into a kind of a frenzy in the spring,” she went on. “I can’t get enough. Just about this time yesterday, the light was so good that I wanted to go out and paint from the trestle. I tried to get a babysitter, but it was kind of a last-minute thing and no one could do it. So I got all the kids ice cream — I thought maybe that would

THE COLORS OF THE RIVER

(continued)

keep them quiet for at least ten minutes, which is all I needed to get what I wanted. I parked the car where I could see it. But by the time I got out on the trestle and got my easel set up, I could see the ice cream was flying — I had to give it up.”

The wind brought the river up toward us, a stormy current, and the sun began to set behind the trees, but the light remained strong against the island. Upriver, above where the Mill River meets the Connecticut, there was a line as straight as if it had been drawn, where the rough water turned smooth. It was as if we were in a private storm. Overhead the sky was streaked with mare's tails — a wash of thin white clouds over the old blue.

“This is like taking notes. Shorthand,” she said as she worked. “The lines guide me — they give me the movement. When I get home, I do the painting. If I take a board like this out with me and I work on it right on the spot, it gives off energy that a pencil sketch can't give me. If I go out and sketch on a pad and bring it back and try to transfer it to a canvas, it doesn't have the same power. It's once removed.”

It was only a matter of 10 or 15 minutes before she was finished. She turned the board toward me — her sketch, wavy green lines that intersected with purple streaks, looked like a child's drawing.

Together we struggled to pull up the anchor, which pulled back, a tug of war against the river. We paddled to the bend, and on the other side the wind dropped and the water went calm like an engine dying. “Let's drift,” she said, and we stashed our paddles, making the river grow silent.

The houses up on the banks were like squatter's camps made of scrap wood and unmatched windows. In front of one was a big rope hanging over the river from the limb of a tree. Another had a peninsula of sand — fine talclike silt — that looked inviting, but as we passed a big mongrel charged down out of the trees and stood at

the water's edge, his deep bark bouncing off the banks.

The water was a misty yellow, coated with pollen. All around us fish began to move, muscling up out of the water like beggars from the deep. Jamie pointed to a V line that was moving across in front of us. A muskrat poked his head up like a seal and shot back down, leaving a commotion on the yellowed surface. A disposable lighter drifted past. Elwell Island came into view.

“I wonder, if we just kept going, if I could sketch as we drift,” she said, “if I could sketch that fast.”

That night, after I got into bed, I felt the motion of the canoe drifting easily downriver. I heard the fish feeding on the river's surface, plunk, plunk, plunk, like the start of a heavy rain. I imagined Jamie's sketch worked out on an endless canvas that could show the river as I'd seen it, from here back down to Old Lyme, and all the colors she would need to make it right. □ □