

Meander Is a Noun

by Erin Hemme Froslic

1.

On an otherwise pleasant late October afternoon, my phone buzzes from a local breaking news alert. The news: A couple taking a Sunday stroll finds a grim discovery—a body near the Red River, north of Main Avenue in Fargo, not far from my home.

This is newsworthy, of course; the dead in public always are. Still, I barely glance at the alert and return to grading papers written by my first-year students. I find the event neither alarming nor particularly attention-grabbing. I've lived near this river for nearly twenty-five years. In my former career as a journalist, I listened to police scanners and scrambled out of the newsroom when tidbits like this crossed the airwaves. Bodies in the Red River are an occasional fact of life.

From my local newspaper in May 2009:

Brothers were fishing along the river Saturday evening when they discovered the body.

In August 2017:

Kayakers on the Red River made a grim discovery ... reported finding a body-sized object wrapped in plastic in the river, hung up on a log near the 90th Avenue Northwest bridge.

From a local television broadcast in August 2022:

Juveniles discovered a body in the river around 12:30 P.M.

One of the news stories is accompanied by a photo of emergency workers huddled along the banks of the river. In the foreground, I can see exposed roots of the trees that grow along this part of the Red. The river's bends ensure that whatever drifts along the current slams into the bank and gets caught in these roots that dangle. Logs. Discarded shopping bags. One summer, they caught the casings of a bomb from World War II. Once a year or so, a body.

2.

To meander is a verb. It's what I do when I walk my dog, Murphy. Snout to ground, he follows the scents of the other neighborhood dogs and these trails swerve from boulevard to lawn to fire hydrant to tree. I try to keep up. Meander is what my mind does in the middle of the night when I wake up with worry and nothing makes sense: Is there yogurt in the fridge for breakfast? Am I being fair to my student with anxiety? Maybe I should find a job at Starbucks?

The word meander suggests movement that is aimless, drifting, and rambling. It implies an uncertain destination. When I am feeling poetic, I imagine timeless, romantic strolls through the countryside. Sunny and warm, of course. A hint of lavender in the air as a gentle breeze tickles the tops of tall grasses. I imagine flowing skirts and oversized straw hats. Maybe a beach.

A geologist explains meander to me this way: it's a series of regular sinuous curves in the channel of a river or other watercourse. A meandering stream has a single channel that winds snakelike through its valley. I jot down these phrases to make sure I get it right. In the end I describe it like this: meandering is when the distance "as the stream flows" is greater than "as the crow flies."

Another significant detail about meanders is that they are more common and dramatic on flat land. Streams that tumble down mountainsides are controlled by the valleys they carve, their courses set in literal stone. On the plains, however, rivers establish their own possibilities.

My personal experiences with meandering don't include water at all. Meandering is the memory of Sunday afternoon drives with my parents. They pile me and my two younger brothers into a maroon van—there's no longer room for all of us on the bench seat of our red Chevy pickup truck. My father rolls down his window and we drive the gravel roads that surround our southwestern Minnesota farm. Slowly. My father's left elbow balances on top of the open window while he keeps an eye on both the road ahead and the growing fields to the side. The clouds of dust that follow us can be seen for a mile or so. For my farmer father, this routine is gossip, a way to stay abreast of the work of our neighbors. Whose corn is ready to tassel? Whose soybean fields are riddled with cocklebur?

I am quickly bored with this seeming lack of direction, this lack of purpose. For a while I stare out the window but I can't read the language my dad knows intuitively. Where he sees hay damaged by hail, I see only an ocean of pale-colored grass. Where he sees a year's worth of income, I see endless rows of jade.

I return to the Trixie Belden mystery novel I've brought along to read. I have more patience for the meanderings and meddling tendencies of youthful sleuths than I do for my own family. I find comfort in the ongoing tale of a teenage girl with annoying big brothers and a gorgeous best friend—nicknamed Honey!—who lives next door. Her home in the Hudson River Valley of New York is so different from my own but I recognize the main character's need to seek out mystery, her desire to escape the monotony of a sleepy rural existence. As I read, a blast of air from my dad's open window whips my long hair in front of my eyes, into my mouth. I try to tuck strands behind my ears, but they don't stay.

By now, my brothers have begun to pick fights with each other, their version of entertainment. I am still hopeful my parents will take us out for ice cream in one of the local towns or maybe pizza in Sioux Falls. No matter how far or long we wander, we always return home. And for me, this circular journey is more interesting than never having left at all.

A lifetime later, when I live in a different place near a river, I walk its trails and stop on a bridge over its channel. I look through chain link fencing to the flowing water below. From this perspective, the water river looks peaceful. But I know that appearance is deceiving. Over time, a small disturbance—a log, for example—can cause a meander to expand sideways and slightly downstream. The velocity of the stream shifts toward the outside of the bend, causing erosion on the outer bank. Meanwhile, the inside of the meander collects deposits of sediment, sand. Every meandering river is, in reality, the scene of a silent geological war. The water destroys and creates, it hides and reveals. The only certainty with a river is that while its course may meander, the water that flows through its channel never returns.

3.

Near the Red River, a body was found. A body was found near the Red River, north of Main Avenue in Fargo. A body of a 32-year-old man was found near the Red River,

north of Main Avenue in Fargo. It turns out, no matter how many different ways I twist and turn that phrase or think about it, it all leads to the same ending. The body of a 32-year-old man with no permanent address was found near the Red River, north of Main Avenue in Fargo.

Months from this moment, three men will be arrested, charged, and found guilty for killing this man. Court documents will say one man repeatedly stabbed the victim with a knife while another held him down. The victim was able to get away but collapsed near the river shore. The murder is violent and senseless and horrible, as all murders are.

But before the charges and the trial and the ongoing headlines, investigators identify the 32-year-old. His name: Philip Dewey Bergquist.

It took me a few days, but I recognize this name.

And it's at this point I pay attention. This is the moment the narrative changes direction, and the news becomes more than noise.

4.

There's a one-room log cabin less than a three-minute walk from my house. It is rustic and old. To get to it I head down a sidewalk covered in colorful chalk art drawn by the neighborhood kids and then past a home with an apple tree in its front yard. Tucked behind a row of twin homes, where asphalt meets the soft ground of woods, I can see the outline of the cabin. From this angle it looks like a shed, a place where you'd store a snow blower or lawn mower.

I didn't know it had a name until my neighbor told me. Later, I learn the dwelling is owned by the local historical society. It is the oldest original structure in my city and is named for the Swedish immigrant who built it, John G. Bergquist. In the summer months, it blends into the vegetation and in the winter months, the weathered oak boards are difficult to distinguish from the bark of the willows and elm and cottonwood that grow nearby. The Bergquist cabin is located on a small strip of urban wilderness, a slice of public easements that separate the river from the housing developments that have built up around it. Deer often congregate at this site. I like to see them here, in nature, more so than in our backyard munching on landscaping. In the winter, I watch these creatures paw through banks of snow outside this former dwelling, their hides an extension of the

cabin's exterior palette. All browns and grays, a sharp contrast against the white drifts. A scene you might find on a Christmas card.

5.

A few months before the news alert about a body in the Red River lights up my phone, I am pulling weeds from my front-yard garden when I see my neighbor Gwen—the one who knows the name of the Bergquist cabin—step out of her garage. She is exactly the kind of person I want to live next door. She knows all the neighborhood news and we occasionally swap recent book titles we've read. I borrow her large crockpot at least once a year so I can feed my now teen-aged kids and their friends during theatre dress rehearsal weeks. She offers me the perfect balance of gossip and help.

We solidified our friendship when my twin daughters were born. Gwen and her husband, both close to retirement at the time, offered to help. My husband was teaching an evening class once a week, so I was grateful for the extra hands. They entertained my preschool-aged son while I bathed babies. They rocked and fed babies, so I could tuck in my eldest. In the years since, they have attended Sunday school programs and purchased coupon books to support my kids' activities. We exchanged a set of house keys and once a week, they walk my dog.

I stand up, brush the soil off my knees, and give a friendly half-wave to Gwen. She comes over. "Say, I've got something to tell you," she says.

She launches into a story about how the day before she took her daily walk. A few years ago, the city rebuilt concrete trails along the river. The busiest street through our neighborhood is a designated bike lane for recreational cyclists, runners, and walkers who cross floating bridges and a former toll bridge to paths on the other side of the river. Gwen and her husband regularly stroll these paths, and I occasionally am the audience for tales from their neighborhood adventures.

Gwen tells me she was walking alone and on her return home, she paused for a moment to admire the Bergquist cabin. As she stood there, she noticed a tall, thin, middle-aged man walking along the path. She describes him as scruffy—unshaven and disheveled. He wore a large backpack.

"I thought he'd keep walking," Gwen says. "But then he came right up to me."

“You’re kidding,” I say.

My outward response does not reflect the internal anxiety I feel building. I’m no longer paying attention to the sweat dripping down my back. My chest begins to tighten. Gwen is in her 70s; she is a fierce but small woman whose nickname is “Ginger.” Even though I know her story ends well—she’s here, telling it—my mind begins to imagine all the horrible could-have-been, might-have-been scenarios. As much as I appreciate living near the river, its bends and underbrush offer respite for those who can’t or don’t want to stay in one of the community homeless shelters. Occasionally, I’ll see a tent set up or the remnants of a campfire between trees in the floodplain. Men wearing backpacks or carrying shopping bags occasionally wander through our neighborhood. I never feel unsafe walking along the river in daylight. But the thought of my neighbor approached by a strange man leaves me unsettled. It’s unfair and I know it, but I assume the man is homeless. And because I assume he doesn’t have a home, I am suspicious of his motives. What if he were drunk? High? Violent?

I am ready to lecture Gwen about how she should’ve immediately left the site when she tells me the man was friendly, charming even. “Have you ever been in there?” he asked her, nodding toward the Bergquist cabin. Gwen acknowledged she had—she is a sucker for Scandinavian history—and they briefly chatted about its charm. Then the man held out his hand for Gwen to shake. As Gwen remembered it, he introduced himself as Petey and then declared without any irony: “This is my cabin.”

The look on my face must reveal my concern and Gwen responds without me asking the question. “I wasn’t scared,” she assures me. That said, she was nervous enough to glance over to the nearby playground where two adults were watching their children play. If she felt in danger, she tells me, she could’ve shouted to them. After a few more friendly exchanges, Petey politely announced he needed to go.

“I was going to leave too, but then I saw him set his backpack down. He reached into his bag and pulled out a ...” Gwen pauses for dramatic effect, and it works. I am imagining all the possible ways one could fill the silence. A knife? A gun? A snake?

“He pulled out a bolt cutter,” she says.

“A bolt cutter?” I repeat her words to make sure I’ve heard correctly. If I had an assumption about where this story is going, it no longer exists.

“Yep. He pulled out a bolt cutter, tossed his backpack over a shoulder, and walked over to the cabin. Then he used the bolt cutter to snip the padlock off the door.”

I stare at her. I am so shocked I can't make sense of what she has said. A strange man has a conversation with my neighbor. He insists the historic cabin in our neighborhood is his. He has a bolt cutter in his backpack. He breaks the lock off the door. I hear the words Gwen said, but I don't understand what just happened. Why did this man have a bolt cutter? How did it fit in the backpack? Why's he breaking into a cabin with no valuables inside? Is he still there? Should we call the police? Why didn't Gwen call the police?

“What happened next? What did you do?”

Gwen looks directly at me: “He walked inside and shut the door behind him. I came home.”

I think about this story a few weeks later when I read about Phillip Bergquist's death in the local newspaper, when I read that his family and friends called him P.D. It took me a couple days to put all the pieces together. As soon as I did, I texted Gwen. She had come to the same conclusion. Petey didn't break into the cabin. Phillip “P.D.” Bergquist did.

It takes me longer to come to another conclusion. The cabin is his.

6.

Meander is a noun, too.

One afternoon I pull up Google Earth on my computer so I can follow the path of the Red River. I'm curious if it meanders as much as I think it does. From an aerial view, I trace my cursor along the river corridor. There are places along its 550-mile journey where it bends gently. But as this northern river flows into the metro area of Fargo-Moorhead, I see where it twists so tightly it nearly forms a closed loop. This winding path or course is the meander, the noun. It is where the river makes a U-turn and changes direction. It explains, among other things, why some of the roads where I live become unexpected dead ends; why they turn in the most unlikely places. For a community built on the flat grid of the open plains, this unpredictability is jarring.

I play with the zoom feature to bring the river into focus. It's another way of understanding this feature that influences so much of my life, from the taxes I pay to the fears I have each spring when the snow melts. Close up I see a calm lane of water flanked by rows of trees and, further inland, wide open park spaces. This looks like prime waterfront property. If I zoom out far enough, my perspective changes. In this zone the river looks like something my children drew when they were in preschool. Although it's been years since they were that little, I can picture them sitting at our kitchen table, grabbing a crayon and scribbling a story down the middle of a blank page. Like their creations, this river corridor seems spontaneous and intentional at the same time. It has a story, but sometimes it's a difficult one to comprehend.

In my search for a more moderate aerial view of the river, I center the digital map so my entire neighborhood fills the computer screen. I identify my house—it's the only one with a rust-colored roof—and follow the street as it jogs south, then east, then south again into Homestead Park where the Bergquist cabin stands. From this perspective, it is easy to see the meanders. I'm not a limnologist, but I count four on the screen. One is so abrupt the land juts out into the river in the shape of a triangle. This spot is along the river trails and there's a sitting bench there. It's a place to relax when I need to be by myself. It's removed from the bustle of the city around me and if I close my eyes I can almost imagine that I am bathed in the quiet of my rural upbringing. The blackbirds and crows sound the same. When I open my eyes and look across the river, I watch the water from upstream flow past me and head north to its destination. Without moving, I watch the past flow into the future. Here I can imagine my own past, present, and future all at the same time.

7.

Most of what I know about the Bergquist cabin's history I learn from a sign posted near its location. A few years ago, our city park board completed a concrete bike trail that follows the dips and curves of the Red River banks. It's part of a long-term plan to make the river more public, more accessible. One segment of this trail begins where the Bergquist cabin stands and this entire area—the cabin, the path, the playground—is now named Homestead Park. From a posted description, I read that more than 150 years ago

an immigrant cut oak trees on the west banks of the Red River and skidded the logs across frozen water with rented oxen. This young homesteader, recently launched from the old ground of Sweden, the country of his birth, was determined to make his mark. He moved to the Red River Valley on the promise of the Homestead Act and completed all the necessary requirements. He built a one-room shelter, tilled the land for a few years, and the U.S. government handed him a deed to the property.

In the 1970s, some of Bergquist's descendants—including his son, Jim, and a grandson who was a local news weatherman celebrity—restored the cabin to its original form.

One challenge with refurbishing this particular piece of history, however, is the Bergquist cabin isn't easily visible from well-traveled roads. It can't be seen from the river. Its seclusion provides some peace from the bustling neighborhood around it, but it has made it the target of vandalism and illegal activities over the years. One summer a board member of the county's historical society wrote a letter to the editor in our local newspaper thanking concerned residents who called about suspicious activities taking place at the historic dwelling. The letter writer noted that "n'er-do-wells were found hiding their vehicles on the property, which is sheltered from the road by a row of bushes. Needless to say, we appreciate the tipsters calling police and letting us know." The board voted to use chains and padlocks to keep the "n'er-do-wells" away.

This explains why P.D. Bergquist needed a bolt cutter. It was locked. It also doesn't explain why he needed one. Why did he want to break in, in the first place?

8.

In the weeks after P.D.'s death, local media pursue all the possible angles to his story. They interview his parents. They try to interview the mother of his child but she declines. I follow the headlines diligently because I'm curious and it now feels more personal.

I learn from news reports that P.D. had a job and a home in Wisconsin, but a few months before his body was found in the Red River he moved to the Fargo-Moorhead area. His mother tells the newspaper that her son moved to be closer to his family's

history. His late grandparents lived in the area and his great-great grandfather was John G. Bergquist.

P.D. never rented an apartment or searched for a job. He tossed everything of importance to him in a bag. His homelessness was due, in part, to his struggles with mental health, his parents said.

This offers context for what I learn next. One spring night—six months prior to his death—P.D. did exactly what Gwen observed later that summer: he used a bolt cutter to remove the padlock on the door of the Bergquist cabin. Authorities were alerted and removed him from the cabin. They booked him in the county jail near the courthouse, a few blocks away from where he was arrested. He was charged with a felony for the possession of burglary tools and misdemeanors for trespassing and damaging property.

But what makes my heart break is when I read, again, that P.D. claimed the cabin was his. He wasn't belligerent, but he insisted he was protecting what belonged to his family, what belonged to him.

P.D.'s father is quoted in the newspaper as saying his son was embarrassed about the incident. "I think he honestly thought it was okay for him to be there and stay there because it had our last name on the front," he says.

P.D. was released from jail a few days later after a court hearing. The felony charge was dismissed during the summer, the two misdemeanors following his death.

Over the coming weeks, this is the story of P.D. I am drawn to. His death is violent and senseless and newsworthy. I follow the headlines; I request the police reports and court documents. But the question that wakes me up in more than one night: why did P.D. insist on coming back to the cabin his ancestor built?

His family assumes he turned to the cabin because it's a place his family visited often while he was growing up. P.D. spent many nights sleeping under bridges when he first got to Fargo, his father said, adding he used to worry about what his son would do come winter, knowing how cold it gets. "He just thought (the cabin) was his place to go ... and I can't blame him, he'd been homeless for a while," Paul Bergquist tells the media. "Any port in a storm."

I accept this on the surface. Yes, of course, the cabin offered security and comfort. But I wonder if P.D. was looking for something else, a past he couldn't recreate.

9.

When I think back on my own childhood, it's the memories of mundane moments that most make me nostalgic for what used to be. It's the spontaneous coffee hours when relatives dropped by unannounced. It's swinging on a swing set my father built and singing *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus in the Morning* at the top of my lungs as my toes pointed to the sky. Some of these moments I left by choice, others were lost to an inevitable symptom of growing up.

When I was young, I only imagined leaving my sleepy rural existence. Getting out meant success; staying meant comfort. Like a meander that confuses, in some ways I did both and neither. When I left home, I didn't travel far in distance but I did in experience and expectation. Like P.D., I often return to the site of my childhood. I am loyal and protective of it, but I also don't quite fit.

When my own children launch their lives, I wonder if they will recall hours spent at the playground across a small cul-de-sac from the Bergquist cabin. We start to visit it regularly the year my oldest child turned one. This is the perfect place for toddlers and then preschoolers to run around. The dead-end street that leads to both the playground and the Bergquist cabin ensures there is no car traffic to worry about. The wilderness set aside for flood control is quiet enough that you can hear frogs chirping from a nearby slough. Usually, the only threat of any kind is a flock of wild turkeys that wanders through our neighborhood. They also fly short distances, something I didn't know until I once called the local animal dispatch to assist a bird "stuck" in our crabapple tree. Once I counted twenty-two turkeys perched in the branches of a bare tree along the river. They looked like vultures and sounded like angry old women.

Turkeys or not, my children call this particular playground the "Purple Park" because the tall, spiral slide—the playground's defining feature—is constructed from plastic purple material. One of the favorite photos from my son's childhood was taken when he slid down it on his back. The fine strands of baby hair fly straight out of his head from the build up of static electricity. I display a framed copy of it in my office, forever preserving him in his chubby childhood.

It's at this park that I push my kids in swings and hold my breath while they climb the mock rock wall before, I swear, they are big enough and coordinated enough to do

so. I close my eyes and remind myself that this is how kids build strength and confidence and independence. They need to jump; I just can't bear to watch. I don't know how far they'll go. And I know even if they stay, it will never quite be the same.

Because home is always shifting and being re-defined. That is true for P.D.; that is true for my children; it is true for me.

10.

My dog Murphy and I are both anxious to get some fresh air. The temperature has finally warmed up after subzero temperatures for nearly a week, so we step outside during the golden hour before sunset to discover a western sky painted in pinks and purples. You never know what's coming.

This is true of prairie skies and meandering rivers.

We head toward the river and this route takes us by the Bergquist cabin. We haven't walked along this trail since winter settled in, and I glance at the structure to confirm the padlocks are secure and the doors are shut, to keep things out, to keep things in. I look to see if there's a shadow meandering along the inside walls. I can no longer walk by this cabin without thinking about the man who built it and the descendant who broke in. I imagine P.D. sleeping on the wooden floor, an accidental neighbor.

As Murphy and I continue along our journey, we reach the bench that is now covered with several inches of snow. Even though it's winter and the river is frozen, I can imagine how the water flows in the summer. Meanders twist and turn, they hide and reveal.

I look down and remember that I cannot see where the river goes when it passes the far bend. I cannot see what's coming around the upstream corner. I live near a meander. The currents are strong.



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