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The Eau Claire Log Drivers

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The Eau Claire Log Drivers: 1887

Rain blackens the limestone peaks
pouring down the backbone of the earth
streaking down, needle to bough to ground
and over the green bearberry leaves
into depressions, overflowing
down waterlines of brooks, to creeks
to the Kananaskis

On the Eau Claire drive
nine men were crossing above the falls
sleepy in the morning chill

The river was a road to work
they knew; except on a sunny day
they'd forgotten yesterday's rain
still swelling to flood

Maybe an oar broke against a sweeper
or late-night whiskey in the brain, made weak
the oarsmen, when a backwater rip
spun them astern and they'd only time
to turn her straight downstream

At the first falls they took on water
At the second they took on more
At the third, the boat went under

Six men thrown out were crushed
against the cliff in a crimson melee

Three survivors surfaced in the clear
shaking alive in the glacial cold

Five bodies the river gave up
The sixth? His bones are buried
under the silt of the reservoir
that now backs up the power
of both sun and cloud
and turns lights on in city streets
or music on lonely farms

And Kananaskis Falls is now
an underwater memory
that trout swim through

Where rusted peavey blades
and logging chains
are bracelets
round some gleaming bones

They waved those peaveys bravely,
proudly once, shining in the sun

Until the river, jealous of all that glimmers
pulled them down its winding stairs

SID MARTY is the author of five books of poetry and five of nonfiction. He resigned his position as a park warden in the Rockies in 1978 to begin a career as a full-time writer, poet and singer-songwriter. He is known also as an advocate for national parks and as an environmental activist. He and his wife Myrna live at the foot of the Livingstone Range near the Crownsnest Pass in southwestern Alberta.