

THE RIVERMAP

for Raquel Rabinovich

The spectacle of everybody busy being
takes breath for beauty

the three sufferings of sentient life

the rivermap & we're done
said Olson.

She brought instead
the rivers,
let them say their own mythos
sign their own portraits,

when you get down to it,

a map is mud.

2.

Well begun is half done.

From the dried mud of one
make wet with the water of another

or from rain, the unicursal river
declare a likeness to history
that investigation of where anybody
once may have been or gone,
touch of rain, touch of skin,
the tooth of memory
that blinding approximation
that marshals and misleads.

There is no memory, there is only water,

every river is Lethe,

no memory, only what the river remembers.

3.

The watershed writes its long alphabets across the plain.

What does the river do, Nile or Annisquam?

A river touches.

A river arrives

and touches you. Even a river that is no river

—like the Harlem, the East—is a river,

a river is a moving water in between,

don't sweat the source or where

the thing comes into whose mouth,

even the evil Wallkill

conduit of shame

running north in a south-tending landscape

running from a Jersey lake up to a decent Blue Mountain
stream,

even that

bitch of a river

comes to the sea

circuitous, by a long promenade
through the miseries of humankind,
gold dust and dead Mohicans.

What grief I knew along its banks,
it leached my skin off and left me
nothing but words
gibbering literature,

you can smell the mean of it a mile
away.

4.

So I blame the river for everything
and here in her studio I study the river's confession,
compare it with what other rivers said,
Take time to know me, Be small to read my writ,
my writ is named in water, and mud remembers.

5.

But what shall it profit a woman
to pick the whole river up?
She will write with it,
little bibles, tender lies
with music in them,

write with it

till everything you see
becomes the same color
more or less
a song

An old peddler came to our town
selling buttons and mirrors
buttons and mirrors
to give to your lovers
buttons to bind them
mirrors to make their rivers run

and when they come

smiling

to knock on the door of your bungalow
you put down the mallet and wrenches
the pens and the bandoneon
the spoon and the housecat

and welcome them,

river by river

until there is nothing left

mechanical in you

and all is natural flow,

fluency of the gods,

those poignant broken everlasting

identities,

natural art and natural good

lambent around our dumb ankles—

see, the river has forgiven you,

the river has come home.

6.

From across the room all the maps are brown

but the live brown of moonlight on fallen oak leaves

the warm brown of skin,

we live on a brown planet ringed with blue,

Ωkeanos is the River
of which every other river
is a type and an exception.

We can see that the minute we come in,
the brown planet writes its names for us to read,
so we can know this place.

On the brown planet that looks blue from space
because Lord Ωcean hides us from the all-seeing sky.

We touch softly the river maps she's made
soft roughness of eloquent residue.

Robert Kelly

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