

# Strong Brown God: the Poetry of Rivers

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*National*  
**POETRY**  
**MONTH**  
*April 2013*

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ESTABLISHED IN 1996 BY THE  
ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS

POETS.ORG

## River Language

### A Linguistic Journey



Riverside	Aquifer	Downstream
Riparian	Floodplain	Upstream
Riverine	Erosion	Midstream
Bottomland	Aggrading	Fork
Shoal	Degrading	Hydraulic
Eddy	Downcutting	Terrace
Whirlpool	Reach	Flume
Bar	Channel	Gradient
Rapid	Drainage	Slope
Bank	Watershed	Gravel
Bed	Catchment	Gully
Riffle	Basin	Hydrological
Ripple	Sediment	Hyporheic
Bend	Branch	Thalweg
Pool	Stream	Sweep
Hole	Current	Sinuuous
Bankfull	Surface	Tributary
Snag	Submerge	Inflow
Backwater	Depth	Outflow
Alluvial	Sounding	Headwaters
Fan	Groundwater	Mouth
Braid	Surfacewater	Delta
Oxbow	Discharge	Estuary
Meander	Peak Flow	Flood

## Greek Mythology and Rivers: Styx and Lethe

Styx - The Styx (also meaning "hate" and "detestation" adjectival form: Stygian) is a river in Greek mythology that formed the boundary between Earth and the Underworld (often called Hades which is also the name of this domain's ruler).

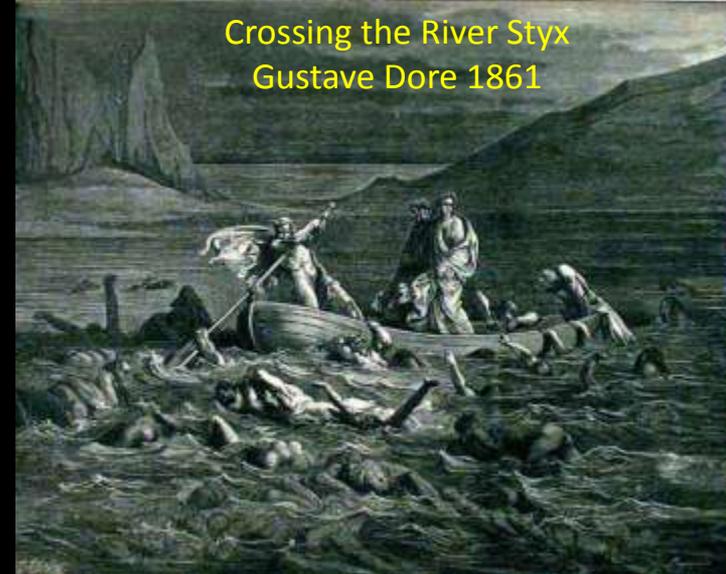
In order to cross the River Styx and reach Hades, a dead person must pay a fee to the ferryman, Charon. If the correct fee is paid, Charon will take the dead across. If the dead cannot afford the fee, however, they will be forced to wander the banks of the River Styx as Wraiths for eternity.

Lethe - In Greek mythology, Lethe was one of the five rivers of Hades. All those who drank from it experienced complete forgetfulness. Lethe was also the name of the Greek spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion, with whom the river was often identified.

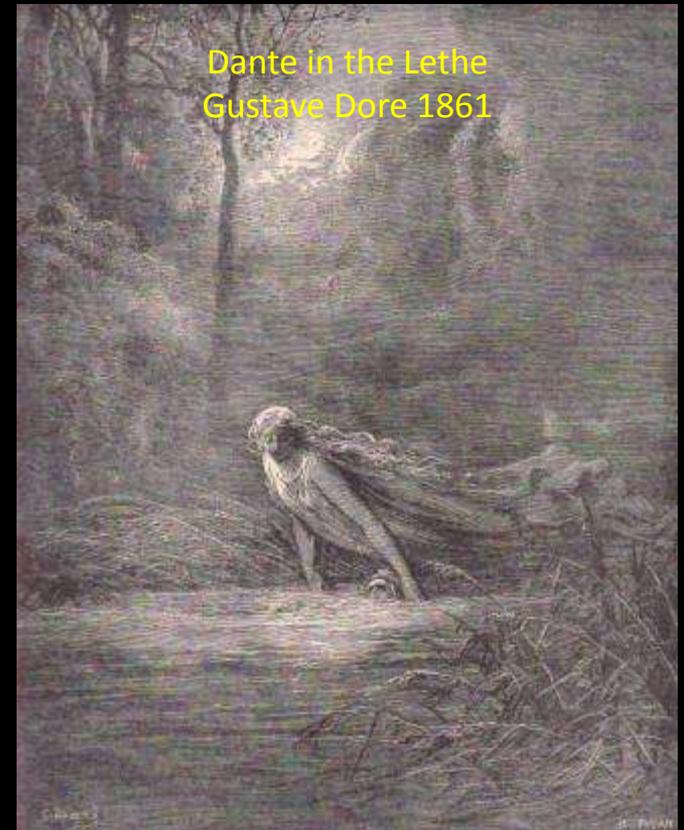
In Classical Greek, the word Lethe literally means "oblivion", "forgetfulness", or "concealment". It is related to the Greek word for "truth", aletheia, meaning "un-forgetfulness" or "un-concealment".

Both rivers are part of the geography of Dante's *Divine Comedy*

Crossing the River Styx  
Gustave Dore 1861



Dante in the Lethe  
Gustave Dore 1861



# The Myth of Orpheus

Orpheus was a legendary musician, poet, and prophet in ancient Greek religion and myth.

The major stories about him are centered on his ability to charm all living things with his music. But the love and loss of Eurydice and the death of Orpheus involves the passage over and into rivers.

Auguste Rodin  
Orpheus & Eurydice (1887)



Tree arising! O pure ascendance!  
Orpheus Sings! Towering tree within the ear!  
Everywhere stillness, yet in this abeyance:  
seeds of change and new beginnings near.

*The Sonnets to Orpheus* Rainer Maria Rilke, February 1922



Orpheus  
Roman mosaic

*The Sonnets to Orpheus*  
Rainer Maria Rilke 1875-1926

But you, divine one singing on the brink of destruction  
while legions of forsaken maenads tore at your flesh;  
you vanquished their shrieks with harmony, oh bright one,  
while from utter devastation rebounded your song afresh.

And though you fade from earthly sight,  
declare to the silent earth: I flow.  
To the rushing water say: I am.



John William Waterhouse (1849–1917)

"Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus"  
1900

Carl Sandburg  
1878–1967

## Languages

There are no handles upon a language  
Whereby men take hold of it  
And mark it with signs for its remembrance.  
It is a river, this language,  
Once in a thousand years  
Breaking a new course  
Changing its way to the ocean.  
It is mountain effluvia  
Moving to valleys  
And from nation to nation  
Crossing borders and mixing.  
Languages die like rivers.  
Words wrapped round your tongue today  
And broken to shape of thought  
Between your teeth and lips speaking  
Now and today  
Shall be faded hieroglyphics  
Ten thousand years from now.  
Sing—and singing—remember  
Your song dies and changes  
And is not here to-morrow  
Any more than the wind  
Blowing ten thousand years ago.



## River Moons Carl Sandburg

The double moon,  
one on the high backdrop of the west,  
one on the curve of the river face,

The sky moon of fire  
and the river moon of water,  
I am taking these home in a basket  
hung on an elbow,  
such a teeny-weeny elbow,  
in my head.

I saw them last night,  
a cradle moon, two horns of a moon,  
such an early hopeful moon,  
such a child's moon  
for all young hearts  
to make a picture of.

The river-I remember this like a picture-  
the river was the upper twist  
of a written question mark.

I know now it takes  
many many years to write a river,  
a twist of water asking a question.

And white stars moved when the moon moved  
and one red star kept burning,  
and the Big Dipper was almost overhead.



## Crossing Brooklyn Ferry

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!

Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves! Gorgeous clouds of the sun-set!

drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me;

Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!

Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta!—stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!

Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!

Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!



Walt Whitman 1819-1892



T.S. Eliot  
1888-1965

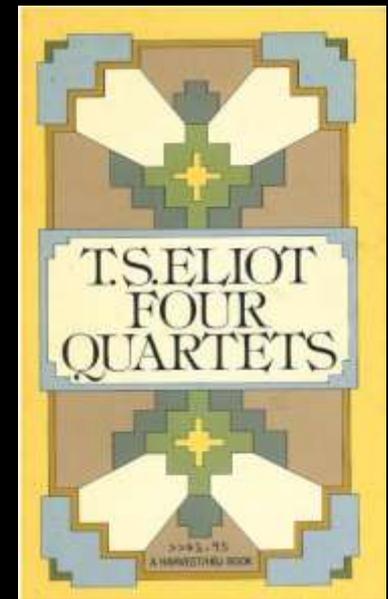
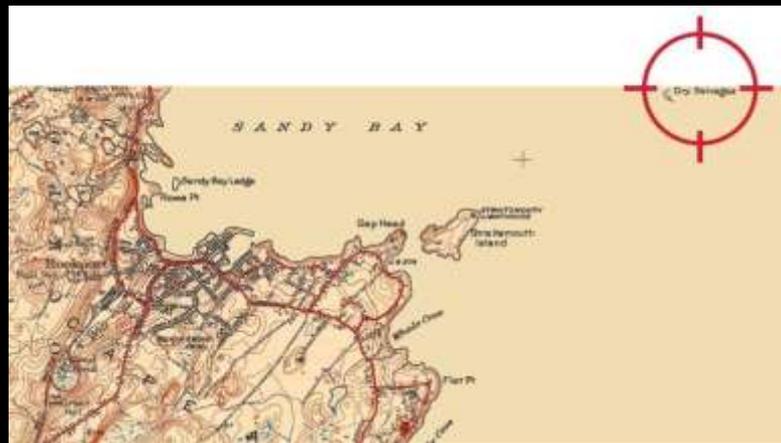
## *Four Quartets*

### “The Dry Salvages”

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river  
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,

Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier;  
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;  
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.  
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten  
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.  
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonored, unpropitiated  
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.  
His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,  
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,  
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,  
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.

The river is within us...



Langston Hughes  
1902-1967

## The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than  
The flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

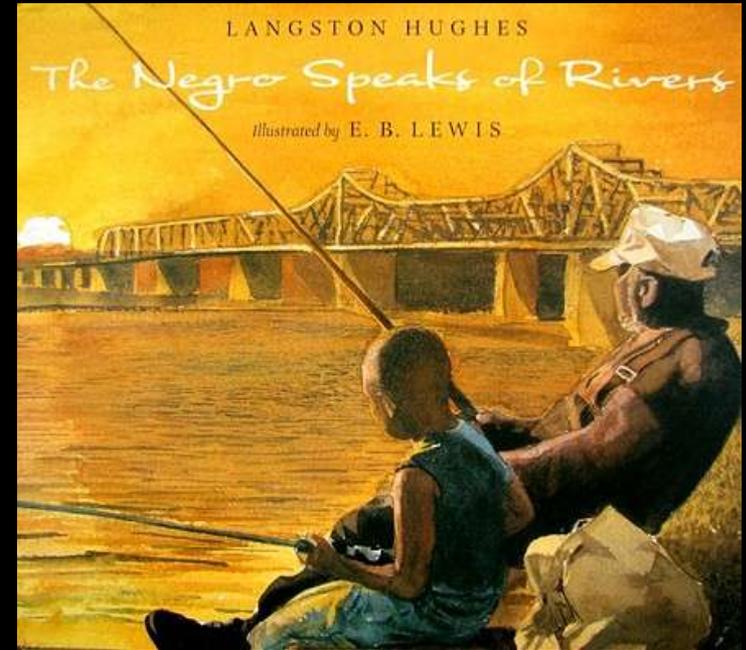
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

Went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its  
Muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.



"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was composed in 1920 on the train to Mexico when Hughes was still in his teens (eighteen to be exact), and published a year later in *Crisis*.



## Rest of Rivers

The willows carried a slow sound,  
A sarabande the wind mowed on the mead.  
I could never remember  
That seething, steady leveling of the marshes  
Till age had brought me to the sea.

Flags, weeds. And remembrance of steep alcoves  
Where cypresses shared the noon's  
Tyranny; they drew me into hades almost.  
And mammoth turtles climbing sulphur dreams  
Yielded, while sun-silt rippled them  
Asunder ...

How much I would have bartered! the black gorge  
And all the singular nestings in the hills  
Where beavers learn stitch and tooth.  
The pond I entered once and quickly fled—  
I remember now its singing willow rim.

And finally, in that memory all things nurse;  
After the city that I finally passed  
With scalding unguents spread and smoking darts  
The monsoon cut across the delta  
At gulf gates ... There, beyond the dykes

I heard wind flaking sapphire, like this summer,  
And willows could not hold more steady sound.



Hart Crane  
1899–1932

Wallace Stevens  
1879-1955

## The River of Rivers in Connecticut

There is a great river this side of Stygia  
Before one comes to the first black cataracts  
And trees that lack the intelligence of trees.

In that river, far this side of Stygia,  
The mere flowing of the water is a gayety,  
Flashing and flashing in the sun. On its banks,

No shadow walks. The river is fateful,  
Like the last one. But there is no ferryman.  
He could not bend against its propelling force.

It is not to be seen beneath the appearances  
That tell of it. The steeple at Farmington  
Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways.

It is the third commonness with light and air,  
A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction . . .  
Call it, one more, a river, an unnamed flowing,

Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore  
Of each of the senses; call it, again and again,  
The river that flows nowhere, like a sea.



Robert Frost  
1874-1963

West Running Brook

'Fred, where is north?'

'North? North is there, my love.  
The brook runs west.'

'West-running Brook then call it.'  
(West-Running Brook men call it to this day.)

'What does it think it's doing running west  
When all the other country brooks flow east  
To reach the ocean? It must be the brook  
Can trust itself to go by contraries  
The way I can with you -- and you with me --  
Because we're -- we're -- I don't know what we are.  
What are we?'

'Young or new?'



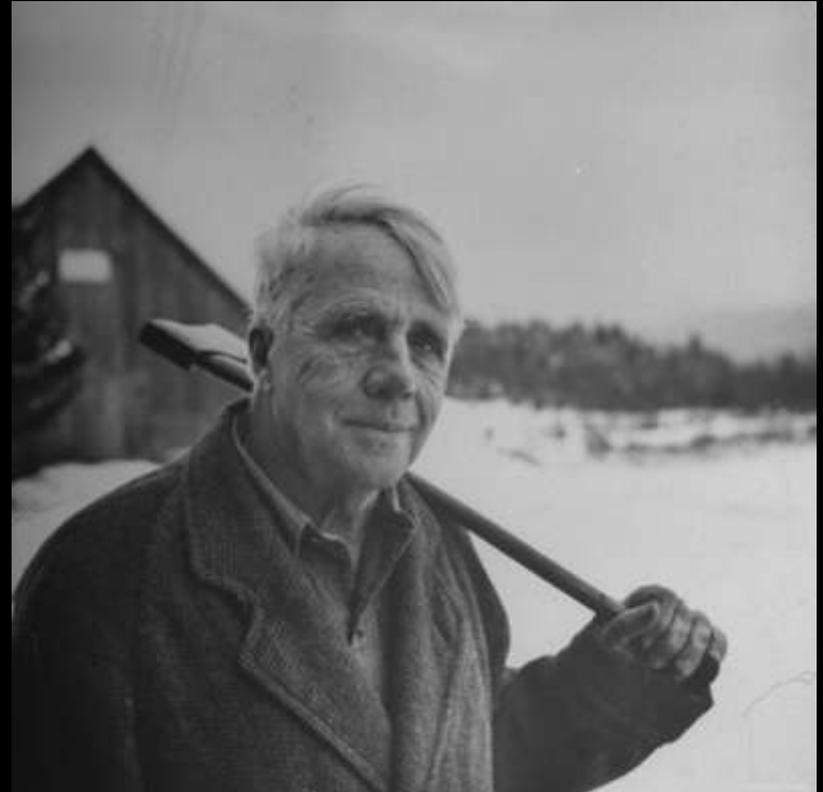
'We must be something.  
We've said we two. Let's change that to we three.  
As you and I are married to each other,  
We'll both be married to the brook. We'll build  
Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be  
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.  
Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave  
To let us know it hears me.'

'Why, my dear,  
That wave's been standing off this jut of shore --'  
(The black stream, catching a sunken rock,  
Flung backward on itself in one white wave,  
And the white water rode the black forever,  
Not gaining but not losing, like a bird  
White feathers from the struggle of whose breast  
Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool  
Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled  
In a white scarf against the far shore alders.)

'That wave's been standing off this jut of shore  
Ever since rivers, I was going to say,'  
Were made in heaven. It wasn't waved to us.'

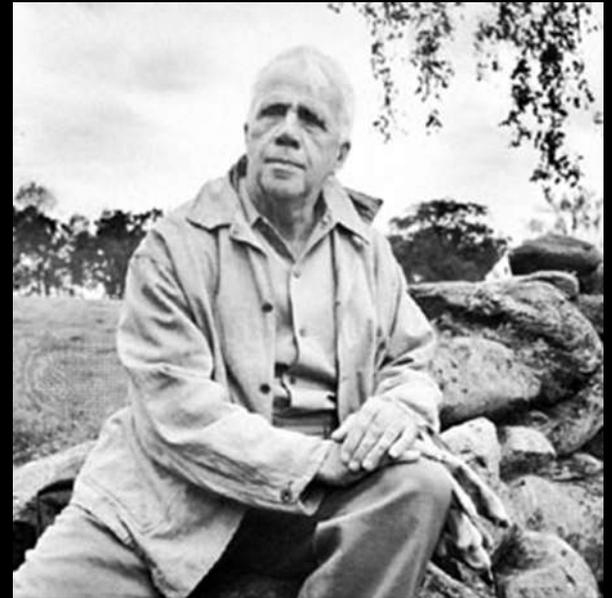
'It wasn't, yet it was. If not to you  
It was to me -- in an annunciation.'

'Oh, if you take it off to lady-land,  
As't were the country of the Amazons  
We men must see you to the confines of  
And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter,-  
It is your brook! I have no more to say.'



'Yes, you have, too. Go on. You thought of something.'

'Speaking of contraries, see how the brook  
In that white wave runs counter to itself.  
It is from that in water we were from  
Long, long before we were from any creature.  
Here we, in our impatience of the steps,  
Get back to the beginning of beginnings,  
The stream of everything that runs away.  
Some say existence like a Pirouot  
And Pirouette, forever in one place,  
Stands still and dances, but it runs away,  
It seriously, sadly, runs away  
To fill the abyss' void with emptiness.  
It flows beside us in this water brook,  
But it flows over us. It flows between us  
To separate us for a panic moment.  
It flows between us, over us, and with us.  
And it is time, strength, tone, light, life and love-  
And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;  
The universal cataract of death  
That spends to nothingness -- and unresisted,  
Save by some strange resistance in itself,  
Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,  
As if regret were in it and were sacred.



It has this throwing backward on itself  
So that the fall of most of it is always  
Raising a little, sending up a little.  
Our life runs down in sending up the clock.  
The brook runs down in sending up our life.  
The sun runs down in sending up the brook.  
And there is something sending up the sun.  
It is this backward motion toward the source,  
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,  
The tribute of the current to the source.  
It is from this in nature we are from.  
It is most us.'

'To-day will be the day...You said so.'

'No, to-day will be the day  
You said the brook was called West-running Brook.'

'To-day will be the day of what we both said.'



Sylvia Plath  
1932-1963

## Crossing the River

Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.  
Where do the black trees go that drink here?  
Their shadows must cover Canada.

A little light is filtering from the water flowers.  
Their leaves do not wish us to hurry:  
They are round and flat and full of dark advice.

Cold worlds shake from the oar.  
The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.  
A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;

Stars open among the lilies.  
Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?  
This is the silence of astounded souls.

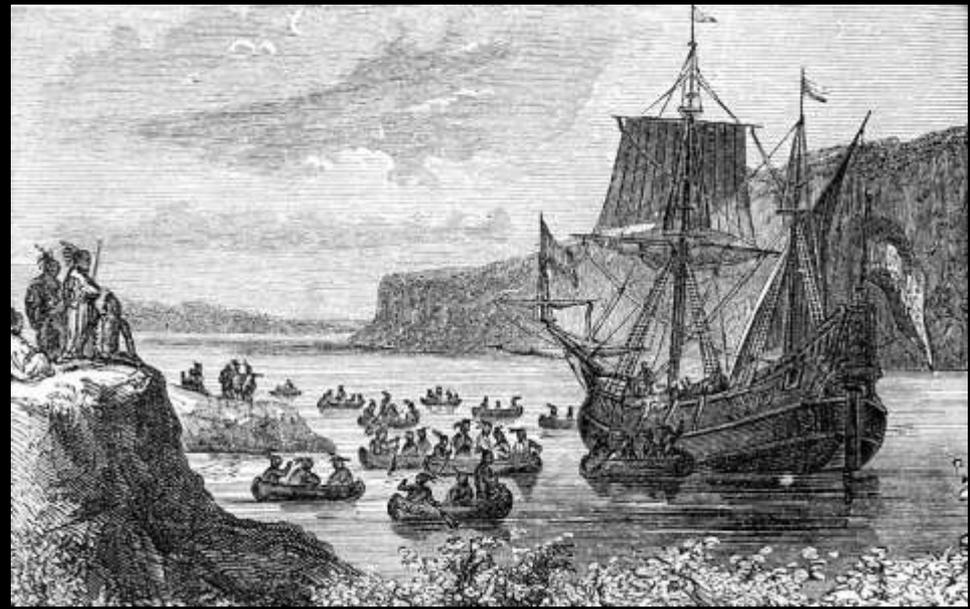


W. S. Merwin

b. 1927

## Another River

The friends have gone home far up the valley  
of that river into whose estuary  
the man from England sailed in his own age  
in time to catch sight of the late forests  
furring in black the remotest edges  
of the majestic water always it  
appeared to me that he arrived just as  
an evening was beginning and toward the end  
of summer when the converging surface  
lay as a single vast mirror gazing  
upward into the pearl light that was  
already stained with the first saffron  
of sunset on which the high wavering trails  
of migrant birds flowed southward as though there were  
no end to them the wind had dropped and the tide  
and the current for a moment seemed to hang  
still in balance and the creaking and knocking  
of wood stopped all at once and the known voices  
died away and the smells and rocking  
and starvation of the voyage had become  
a sleep behind them as they lay becalmed  
on the reflection of their Half Moon  
while the sky blazed and then the tide lifted them  
up the dark passage they had no name for



Jim Harrison

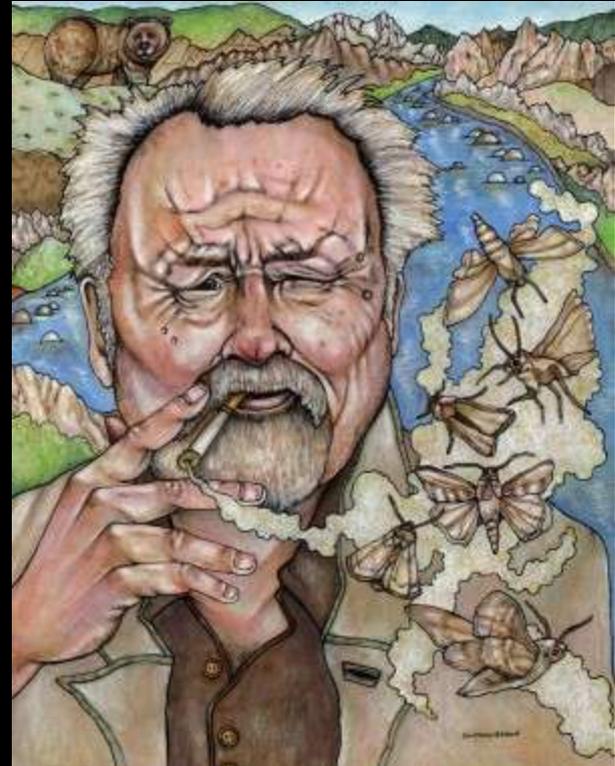
b. 1937

*Songs of Unreason*

Azure. All told a year of water.  
Some places with no bottom.  
I had hoped to understand it  
but it wasn't possible. Fish.

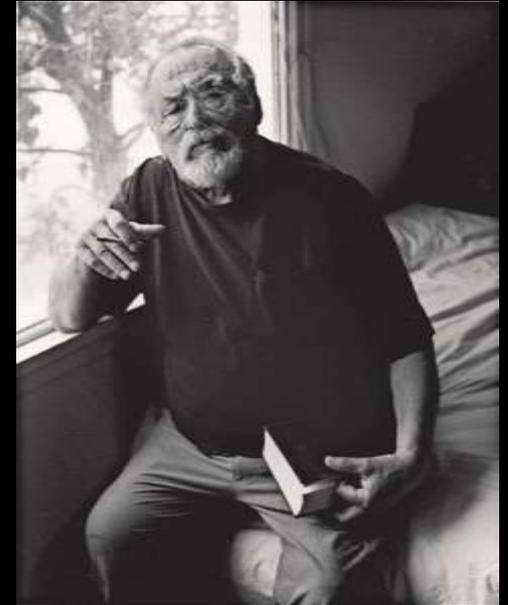
Out of almost nothing, for practical  
purposes nothing, then back as ancient  
children to the great nothing again,  
the song of man and water moving to the ocean.  
– From "River V"

You have to hold your old  
heart lightly as the female river holds  
the clouds and trees, its fish  
and the moon, so lightly but firmly  
enough so that nothing gets away.  
– From "River III"



Of course time is running out. It always  
Has been a creek heading east, the freight  
Of water with its surprising heaviness  
Following the slant of the land, its destiny.  
What is lovelier than a creek or riverine thicket?  
Say it is an unknown benefactor who gave us  
Birds and Mozart, the mystery of trees and water  
And all living things borrowing time.  
Would I still love the creek if I lasted forever?

- From "Debtors"

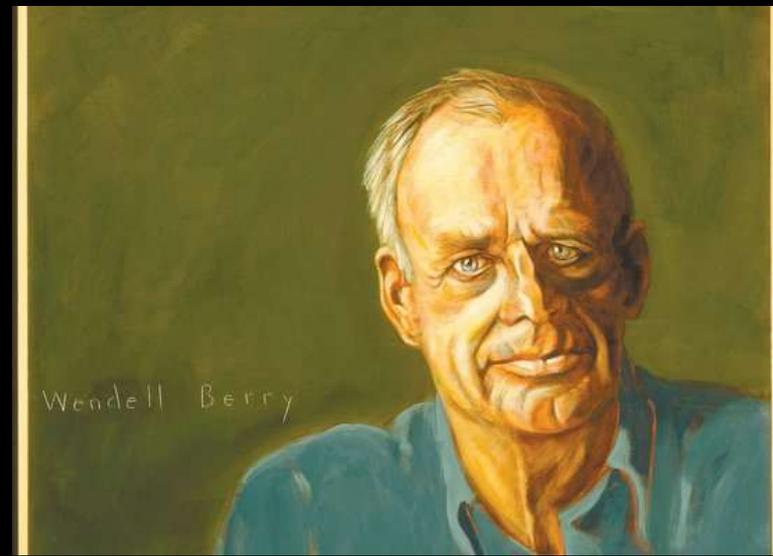


Wendell Berry

b. 1934

## The Peace Of Wild Things

When despair grows in me  
and I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting for their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.



Mary Oliver

b. 1935

## At the River Clarion

1.

I don't know who God is exactly.

But I'll tell you this.

I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone  
and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking.

Whenever the water struck a stone it had something to say,  
and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing under the water.

And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me what they were saying.

Said the river I am part of holiness.

And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water.

I'd been to the river before, a few times.

Don't blame the river that nothing happened quickly.

You don't hear such voices in an hour or a day.

You don't hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears.

And it's difficult to hear anything anyway, through all the traffic, the ambition.



2.

If God exists he isn't just butter and good luck.  
He's also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke.  
Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then keep on going.

Imagine how the lily (who may also be a part of God) would sing to you if it could sing,  
if you would pause to hear it.  
And how are you so certain anyway that it doesn't sing?

If God exists he isn't just churches and mathematics.  
He's the forest, He's the desert.  
He's the ice caps, that are dying.  
He's the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts.

He's van Gogh and Allen Ginsberg and Robert Motherwell.  
He's the many desperate hands, cleaning and preparing their weapons.  
He's every one of us, potentially.  
The leaf of grass, the genius, the politician, the poet.  
And if this is true, isn't it something very important?



Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and each of you too, or at least  
of his intention and his hope.  
Which is a delight beyond measure.  
I don't know how you get to suspect such an idea.  
I only know that the river kept singing.  
It wasn't a persuasion, it was all the river's own constant joy  
which was better by far than a lecture, which was comfortable, exciting, unforgettable.

3.

Of course for each of us, there is the daily life.  
Let us live it, gesture by gesture.  
When we cut the ripe melon, should we not give it thanks?  
And should we not thank the knife also?  
We do not live in a simple world.

4.

There was someone I loved who grew old and ill  
One by one I watched the fires go out.  
There was nothing I could do

except to remember  
that we receive  
then we give back.

5.

My dog Luke lies in a grave in the forest, she is given back.  
But the river Clarion still flows from wherever it comes from  
to where it has been told to go.  
I pray for the desperate earth.  
I pray for the desperate world.  
I do the little each person can do, it isn't much.  
Sometimes the river murmurs, sometimes it raves.



6.

Along its shores were, may I say, very intense cardinal flowers.  
And trees, and birds that have wings to uphold them, for heaven's sakes—  
the lucky ones: they have such deep natures,  
they are so happily obedient.  
While I sit here in a house filled with books,  
ideas, doubts, hesitations.

7.

And still, pressed deep into my mind, the river  
keeps coming, touching me, passing by on its  
long journey, its pale, infallible voice  
singing.



We need knowledge – public awareness – of the small cogs and wheels, but sometimes I think there is something we need even more. It is the thing that *Forest and Stream*, on its editorial masthead, once called ‘a refined taste in natural objects.’

Have we made any headway in developing ‘a refined taste in natural objects’?

- Aldo Leopold, “Round River”



## River Language

### A Linguistic Journey

### Drifting...



Riverside	Aquifer	Downstream
Riparian	Floodplain	Upstream
Riverine	Erosion	Midstream
Bottomland	Aggrading	Fork
Shoal	Degrading	Hydraulic
Eddy	Downcutting	Terrace
Whirlpool	Reach	Flume
Bar	Channel	Gradient
Rapid	Drainage	Slope
Bank	Watershed	Gravel
Bed	Catchment	Gully
Riffle	Basin	Hydrological
Ripple	Sediment	Hyporheic
Bend	Branch	Thalweg
Pool	Stream	Sweep
Hole	Current	Sinuuous
Bankfull	Surface	Tributary
Snag	Submerge	Inflow
Backwater	Depth	Outflow
Alluvial	Sounding	Headwaters
Fan	Groundwater	Mouth
Braid	Surfacewater	Delta
Oxbow	Discharge	Estuary
Meander	Peak Flow	Flood