Foreword

Water is our birthplace. We need and love it. In a bathtub (knees drawn up a little fetally), or by a lake or river, or at the sea, we go to it for rest and refreshment or solace. “I’m going to the water,” city people say when August comes and they crave a break. The sea is a democracy, so big it’s free of access, often a bus or subway ride away, a meritocracy, sink or swim, and yet a swallower of grief because of its boundless scale: beyond the horizon, the home of icebergs, islands, whales. Even our tears are a mysterious, magisterial solvent that bring a smile, a softening of hard thoughts, and lend us a merciful and inexpensive respite, like half an hour at the beach. In any landscape a pond or creek, amber or pewter-colored, catches and centers our attention as magnetically as if it were, in Thoreau’s phrase, “earth’s eye.” And from there rivers run, sometimes placid, often not, to where the ocean thumps and crashes.

I live in Vermont, and my pond is a gentle spot fed by three springs in the woods, each a shallow sink in the ground that is perpetually filling. If you carefully lift away the bottom covering of waterlogged leaves, you see the penny-sized or pencil-point sources of crystalline water welling up, where it all begins—the brook, the pond, the stream, the lake, the river, and finally the

ocean, till rain brings it back again. My pond feeds Wheeler Brook, which empties into Crystal Lake, and then the Barton River, then Lake Memphremagog, which straddles the Canadian border northward into Quebec, and the Magog River, and the St. Francis River, flowing into the vast St. Lawrence. (Some of Rogers’ Rangers, in the French and Indian War, fled past my stream in 1759 after their devastating raid against the St. Francis Indians.) But if I walk about a mile through the woods, I’ll reach a spring that is the headwaters of another brook that feeds into the Sutton River, and then the Passumpsic River, and the Connecticut River, and winds up way south in Long Island Sound.

Rivers were thoroughfares until rather recently. Audubon, Lewis and Clark, Peter Kalm, William Bartram, Johnny Appleseed, and the young Abe Lincoln of course used them, as did anybody who was anybody on the Hudson, the Mississippi, and half a hundred other regions. “The *Ohio* is the most beautiful region on earth,” Thomas Jefferson once wrote. Alligators, alligator snapping turtles, sturgeons or garfish, “white bears” or black bears, pelicans, storks, cranes, swans, herons—all the panoply of nature might be present in the beginning. Logjams and sandbars, cutbanks and oxbows, dolphins, seals, moose swimming, salmon and eagles, quite

like an Alaskan river nowadays, and a riveting definition of the New World.

Rivers have carved the world, and, because they never stop moving—gray, brown, blue, black, or green on a single day—they seem infinitely reassuring. On bridges all over, people stand mooning over them. They can capture a culture, set it in relief, or embody the imagery of exoticism. The Thames, the Seine, the Rhine, the Tiber, the Volga, the Danube, the Ganges, the Yangtze, the Amazon, the Congo, the Niger. I've been to the official start of the Nile at Jinja, at 3,740 feet on Lake Victoria in Uganda (though the actual headwaters include such fractured places as Burundi and Ethiopia), and have driven northward to Nimule, where it crosses the Sudanese border, and to Juba, Malakal, Kosti, and Khartoum, in the Sudan, and have seen it also at Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt, 4,100 river miles away. Hippos and crocodiles swim in it, lions and elephants drink from it (the Siberian tiger was sometimes called the *Amur* tiger, after the great wild Asian river, 2,700 miles long, which the big cat roamed); and the Nile between Lake Albert and Lake No runs through the battleground of Africa's senior civil war, dating from 1955 until today, with two million dead. Much of the Nile is still primeval. But think of the art galleries in Europe from whose windows you can look out and—no coincidence—see running water.

My own brook and pond are a drinking fountain for scurrying raccoons and mincing deer, for a couple of bears, a lone bobcat, and a coyote family. A silent blue heron, as tall as a Christmas tree, and a castanet-rattling kingfisher—a faster flyer and a brighter blue—come fishing for frogs and tadpoles. Garter snakes also will grab a frog if they can, to upgrade their mostly nightcrawler diet. (I have two three-foot matriarchs living under my house who between them produce about fifty babies a year.) And a red-tailed hawk, cruising by, will sometimes swoop to seize a snake or frog, while the bobcat waits for a rabbit where the brook purls slow. Lately a bull moose has begun to use the pond as a hot-weather wallow, soaking for half an hour, mouthing algae, munching sedges, and browsing on the willows that lean from the bank. A

beaver cut down some poplars to gnaw and stitch into a dam that would create the proper depth and flow for wintering, but decided that the depth remained insufficient to withstand our Vermont temperatures and retreated downstream to a larger pond. In summertime, the trees hang over my swimming hole nearby, with a dovish sky showing beyond the canopy of leaves like a hugely enlarged swimming hole, as I watch the swallows and dragonflies hawk after midges, until I feel I was born floating both in the air and water. It's a beguiling hammock, and all the more so because if you relax too much while floating and swimming and let yourself sink, you could conceivably drown—the sky turning bruise-colored as autumn approaches.

"Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness. . . . Thus religion is solitariness; and if you are never solitary, you are never religious," the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote. That's what rivers give us—and the sheen of rainwater on a bare field in March, the crump of surf combed by the wind, foaming and glistening. One doesn't have to be in remote places. I lived beside the Hudson in downtown Manhattan for twenty years, and never failed to grin, in any weather, every morning when I stepped outside. A river is a solitary experience, and grinning sometimes a religion. In a lifetime I have been privileged to visit the Mississippi at Winona, Minnesota, and Venice, Louisiana; to swim in the Rio Grande and the Iowa River; to barge on the Hudson, Yukon, and Stikine rivers. The Tanana, the Taku, the Skeena, the Omineca, the Kuskokwim, the Koyukuk, the Copper, the Colville, and the Susitna rivers are some of the wilderness corridors that I've seen. And this is not boasting, this is a matter of priorities; you can go to all of them with a pack, on a shoestring.

Rivers are hopeful, rivers move: "the river of life," as we sometimes say, not "the mountain of life." Nor do you stand in the flow of a mountain and cast for fish. Rivers debouch out of somewhere beyond you, seamlessly replenished from a million sources, yet sliding toward a larger scheme. Rustling, rattling, peremptorily elbowing a roomy bed for themselves out of any sort of terrain—though often looking as sleek as taffeta even in a savage flood—

rivers represent large-scale order and small-scale chaos, whereas civilization is frequently the reverse: cities that have traffic lights but are disintegrating. Unfortunately, no program of restoration can re-establish that true primitive river clogged with hidden underwater tree-trunk snags, with deadwood driftpiles bristling just above the surface, and “sweepers,” half-uprooted but still living trees overhanging the fast currents where the bank is newly cut away. Beavers inhabit the currents on the slow side, otters swim and dive about, arrowy ducks and V’s of geese cross and recross the sky, and other birds land or else rise in clouds. This is a virgin river, with interminable mucky sloughs and swamps, churning eddies, shifting channels, ice jams, quicksand, whirling stretches, jagged rapids, abrupt falls, the water brown and chalk-colored in regular stripes where different tributaries join. We cannot “clean up” a contemporary river, remove the pollutants, restock it with hatchery fish, and have it be the same.

Rivers used to personify religion and God: perpetually replenished, untidy, changeable, limber, and strong. It must have been unimaginable, except supernaturally, to earlier peoples, how the water got back from the ocean so that the river still flowed. Coyote, Raven, or perhaps Eagle did it.

Peter Mancall’s *Land of Rivers* begins with several such legends (“How Coyote Made the Columbia River”). And then Samuel de Champlain, on the Kennebec in 1605, weighs in. And William Penn, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson. And John James Audubon at a log drive: the benign men and oxen, but the ferocity of the busted logjam. Hawthorne awed and savoring Niagara. Thoreau’s paeon to his Concord River, “probably as old as the Nile or Euphrates.” Phoebe Judson’s Big Blue River. Isaac Cowie’s Ten Shilling Creek and Steel River. John Wesley Powell’s breathless first raft reconnaissance of the Colorado. Horace Bixby matchlessly

tutoring Sam Clemens in reading the Mississippi from the *Paul Jones*. John G. Neihardt—who loved the Missouri as much as Twain relished the Mississippi—condescending to the Nile as a mere “mummy” by comparison. And Robert Frost’s “West-running Brook.” And Langston Hughes’s line, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” And “Ol’ Man River” and “Flat River Girl.” And Helge Instad’s Snowdrift River: “The Snowdrift is the most turbulent river east of Slave Lake.” Proprietary like Neihardt and Thoreau.

Wallace Stegner’s remembered glee as a boy on Henry’s Fork of the Snake River, in *The Sound of Mountain Water*, John Graves’s elegiac *Goodbye to a River*, memorializing Possum Kingdom and the Palo Pinto country on the Brazos River, and Norman Maclean’s haunting rhapsodies on the subject of flyfishing the Big Blackfoot River represent a trio of masterly writers born near the beginning of this century, who could remember a more pristine wilderness, but witnessed its destruction. Lovers of wild, wild places like Jefferson, Audubon, Bartram, and Kalm, they passed the torch to younger writers like the naturalist Ann Zwinger, who is wonderfully lush yet precise at the headwaters of Wyoming’s Green River, and Annie Dillard, in Virginia on Tinker Creek, watching water turtles “smooth as beans” and weightless as men bounding on the moon. And of course the seriocomic warhorse, Edward Abbey, the dean of late-twentieth-century nature writers.

But for an elegy, let’s give the last word to Norman Maclean:

“Eventually all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. . . . I am haunted by waters.”

EDWARD HOAGLAND

Woman on a suspension bridge over the Wakarusa River, late nineteenth century.
Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries.