

*Rivers of the Pacific Northwest*

William Dickey

Two Windows Press, San Francisco, 1969.

Recovered by Jesse Lichtenstein

~\*~

It's raining as I write this—not a downpour, just a drizzle—and that's appropriate. Mid-autumn, Portland, that time of year when the Pacific Northwest dons the damp, gray and green suit it tends to wear for six months straight. On the top floor of Multnomah County's central library, on a day like today, five or six years ago, scanning a shelf for something else, I noticed William Dickey's *Rivers of the Pacific Northwest*. I liked the title. I liked the title page: hand-rendered in the author's imperfect, inviting calligraphy. And when I read the book sitting at a broad wooden library table, I felt that Dickey had absorbed the day outside, the days and weeks preceding it, and the long, overcast months to come.

*Rivers of the Pacific Northwest* is an unfocused book-length poem, a desultory non-philippic. It moves from anecdote to dream, river route to road trip, list to fragment, white space to prosy paragraph-in-verse, all with ease and without much concern for a narrow sense of formal integrity. Poetry remains time-based art, yet this poem feels more like an immersion in an area, and its atmosphere, than a progression through time. It arrives where it begins—there is just more of it.

Dickey wades through a confederacy of water, not just the titular rivers but “standing pools in pastures and woodlots, lines / of the connected low places”—rivers in waiting and rivers in training. An awareness of the chance—the inevitability, if you're watching the long game—of water rerouting to old or untested channels is always present in the poem; every path remains a possibility, a river “breaking / to a new course, into its unused choices.” The poem flips backward in time, trying to imagine the ancient Columbia carving out Dry Falls in a matter of hours (this happened 20,000 years ago after an ice sheet dammed the Clark fork of the river; water built up, flooded Montana, and at last burst through the ice dam, creating what is thought to be the largest and most powerful waterfall ever, burying downstream areas of Washington and Oregon under a hundred feet of water), as well as forwards, into speculative landscapes:

At Canal Flats

the Columbia and the Kootenai run only a mile apart  
the land separating them easy to cross, low-lying

But they run in opposite directions, baroque curves  
hundreds of miles north and south before they can turn  
and flow back toward what they must reach: their union

Natural to want to connect them earlier,  
dig the canal across the Flats, watch  
the two waters flowing together

the new river

For most of its length, *Rivers* spools out as a montage across space and time—linked by geography and hydrology. Along the way there are small, wet Northwestern towns, the dashed-off descriptions instantly familiar, with Grange halls rendered as “a grey box / put anywhere in the midst of very little.” The poem settles into occasional scenes, like the Columbia River’s devastating 1948 flood, of which Dickey recalls this respite from collective sandbagging:

In the blue light by a brick warehouse a gang  
of men saving the airport stood taking a girl  
who stood hard against the wall her skirt up laughing.

Release when whatever happens  
might happen completely  
in the next minute

Saving from the chance of the next minute their most immediate selves.

That release happens, too, in subtle slips, elisions of syntax and punctuation—“who stood hard against the wall her shirt up laughing.” And there’s a longing for it in such (soundly pre-Hurricane Katrina) lines as these:

We live in the world wishing the world would surprise us  
so that we would surprise ourselves, not be so much mastered by  
the security of our daily facts, the assurance  
that the levee is dry and completely solid and cannot fail.

~ ~ ~

William Dickey taught for thirty years at San Francisco State University. There are no doubt many people, perhaps reading this now, who could offer a better résumé of his life and works than what I’ve gleaned from online encyclopedias and obituaries and genuinely dusty dust jackets. He was a native of Bellingham, a student at Reed College in the late 1940s, later a student of John Berryman at Iowa, chosen by Auden as a winner of a Yale Younger Poets, author of fifteen books, married in younger life, later openly gay, and finally a victim of AIDS in the early 1990s.

Berryman seems to have made a lasting impression on Dickey. One of his last poems was “The Death of John Berryman,” of which these lines stick in my mind:

The news of his death preceded him. It hit the water  
with a fat splash and the target twanged.

Rivers again. Those two lines give one a sense of his more sculpted verse. A few poems in the only other Dickey collection I've read—*More Under Saturn* (1972)—allow for formal slippage while evincing a dark humor. But most of those poems are clean and sharp, contained within wide margins. *Rivers*, in contrast, spreads out, floods its banks, looking outward, and downward, at the palimpsests of waterways across the land: phantom selves amid the phantom limbs of rivers.

~\*~

To appreciate how this poem captures the long Pacific Northwest winter, one merely needs to spend a week here. To appreciate the unusualness of this poem—it's lateral, unpredictable movements that eschew a directional flow or a singular vantage point—perhaps it helps to have read a lot of river poems.

A bookshelf coincidence drew me to the poem's title, but it's no coincidence that I took *Rivers of the Pacific Northwest* off the shelf and read it. I grew up near the Rogue River; I live by the Willamette River; I spend a week on the John Day River each summer. I've grown aware of the long back catalog of potamic poetry—Ammons's gravelly run; Bishop dallying at the conflux of the Tapajós and the Amazon; Carew commanding his mistress, "Be thou this Eddy, and I'll make / My breast thy shore"; Hart Crane's Mississippi, "Tortured with history, its one will—flow!"; Hughes comma Langston's soul grown deep; Hughes comma Ted's entire book of river poems; Hugo's iambic Skykomish ("I will reach the sea before December / when the Sky is turning gray and wild"); Petrarch's Laura disguised as riparian flora: "Then let this lovely laurel grow on the fresh bank"; Stevens's anti-Stygian waters, the River of Rivers in Connecticut ("call it, again and again, / the river that flows nowhere, like the sea"); and Auden's river running "out of a bellicose fore-time" down to "the tidal mark where it puts off majesty, / disintegrates, and through swamps of a delta... / wearies to its final / act of surrender, effacement, atonement / in a huge amorphous aggregate no cuddled / attractive child ever dreams of..." A favorite of mine is John Ashbery's "Into the Dust-Charged Air"—a vast litany of river names paired with pleasing action verbs...

The Parnahyba

Is flowing, like the wind-washed Cumberland.  
The Araguía flows in the rain.  
And, through overlying rocks the Isère  
Cascades gently. The Guadalquivir sputtered.  
Someday time will confound the Indre,  
Making a rill of the Hwang. And  
The Potomac rumbles softly. Crested birds  
Watch the Ucayali go  
Through dreaming night. You cannot stop  
The Yenisei...

...and on and on, flowing nowhere. You cannot stop it. Yet Ashbery is (as usual) the exception. By and large, the river poem arrives heavy with the silt of metaphor. Its

pleasures and its pitfalls are equally familiar. As a poet I admire once said, we shouldn't lambaste old poems for carving patterns now smoothly worn. But most river poems—even fine ones—tend to cleave to one of three or four Big Metaphors, however pat. These are, incidentally:

- River as Life's Journey
  - Version 1: river to its mouth = arrival / enlightenment / acceptance / eschatological endpoint
  - Version 2: river to its source = roots of life / consciousness / our common bond
- River as a Barrier / Boundary to Cross (e.g. River Jordan; River Styx)
- No One Steps into the Same River Twice (i.e. the Heraclitus river poem)

The river poem announces itself, you quickly gather what kind of river poem you're dealing with, and long before you get there you know how the poem ends.

A river: motion on the face of the land, volatility in that corridor of motion, the dull knife edge of erosion, the relentless demand of gravity. One reads—or at least I read—*Rivers of the Pacific Northwest* against a backdrop of allegory pre-assigned by hundreds of prior poems to these basic gestures. Yet *Rivers* doesn't try to mimic the course of a certain stream, or stretch one rigid metaphor along strict paths parallel to its waterways. The poem resides in a region veined by rivers, but arteried by roads. After all, most of us get to rivers by way of highways. And anyone who has spent time in a Northern climate can understand this desire:

Had too much winter and bored  
finally, at midnight  
rain continuing, and the forecast of rain continuing  
deciding on the spur of the moment to drive east

At which point the poem moves on four wheels up into the basalt corridors of the Columbia Gorge. Many river poems stake everything on summoning the same timeless qualities they ascribe to their central image. *Rivers of the Pacific Northwest*, on the other hand, is a river poem set in the heyday (and the land) of the automobile, squarely situated in the long 20<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. Western version, with its pleasurable motoring, its abundant hydroelectricity, its illusion of circumscribed nature only occasionally—but then spectacularly—shattered, and its creeping strains of elegy on the shadow side of abundance. And where so much poetry looks to rivers as illustrations of universal truths, Dickey sees rivers as expressions of historical contingency. The poet stands on a dam on the Upper Skagit and pictures this:

When its cable broke, a ferry was sucked under.  
They sat in their cars suddenly in the river.

The other cable held; they were in air again.

More poetry will be written about rivers; more poems will rely on rivers as their primary motive force. Rivers still do move us, still “[flow] into us out of the roots of absence.” In this upper left-hand corner of the country, the motions of rivers are both predictable as rain and unpredictable as river poetry (and regional poetry) should be. *Rivers of the Pacific Northwest* offers, like the rivers William Dickey admires, “An unsureness desired equally with a sureness, and equally provided.”