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Two Mississippis (poem)

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Two Mississippis · John Gery

for Rebecca & Darryl

I

If the river is a woman who awakens
and splashes morning in her eyes, who stretches
her arms and dips them in the dance of dawn,
then combs her hair with sunlight, as she turns
and twists to listen to the brush of trees
beside her in the early breeze, who hums
and dresses delicately, easing her limbs
into her dappled skirt, her mottled sleeves,
who sips her tea then glides out to the gate
to greet the traffic passing there, and who
on entering the street begins to stray
a little, just a little (unaware
the obstacles her independent means
impose on those who'd rather she remain
inside and watch her flowers grow, not slow
their swollen progress to some venal shore),
then bends and wanders, when the weather's right,
and reaches toward the south and, reaching, dreams
the dreams inspiring others drifting by
to fetch her sparkle, taste her sigh, or slip
behind her gaze to take a swim,
then who
are we? Her lover stealing from her bed,
his appetite sated? Her child who,
ignoring how he's sucked her dry, sucks harder?
Her god?
II

And if the river is a man
rugged and brown, but round and muscular,
who wanders through the wilderness at dusk,
who plucks a fallen branch, then ambles on
between the trees, bowing and rising, who
at coming to a clearing scales a rock,
pausing briefly, rubbing his sides, then hums
and winds around the hills to wander down
into a pine grove on their farther side,
who feeds the beavers, beetles, birds, and bears
thinking him kind, who veers through twilit shadows,
their brilliance like a memory that flashes
and is gone, who tells himself those stories
that echo in the breeze they’re carried on,
whose grey eyes pool when he beholds the sun
at last, and at the last who spreads his arms
to seize its light, then turns to go alone
once more in darkness, leaving in his wake
no sign of having been there,
then who are we,
waiting in silence near his path, who strike,
then leave him on the forest floor for dead?
Are we, earth’s thieves, so starved that we must bleed
the bled? Can no kind words for us be said?