

Moez Surani  
Are the Rivers  
in Your  
Poems  
Real

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## ARE THE RIVERS IN YOUR POEMS REAL

*We must read the poem with Keats's own mind—where “sun” equals “Apollo,” where “corn” equals “hopes,” where “mist” summons up “mystery,” where...*

—Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*

*And did you get what  
you wanted from this life*

—Raymond Carver, “Late Fragment”

Are the rivers in your poems real?

Do they eddy and whirl concaves into rocks,  
mingle with plastic bags, effluents, rags,  
rose petals in their rush? Do they originate from specific hills,  
flow to cities, fields of cotton, wearing away one bank  
then another and fed by certain snow?

Do the rivers in your poems sever minds  
or tribes of distrustful?

Could I with my hand scooping at it  
last out a night?

Can the rivers in your poems be visited by another  
such as me?

Are they situated in countries? Endowed with culture and value?  
It is unbelievable to me that Lithuania was once huge.

Or are they symbolic things

like the Zodiac, above us and swirling in her black bed.  
Rivers reflect her bright and distant stones.  
Do they signify borders, flux, journeys, a frontier,  
the site of rebirths and baptisms? I remember

one painting Christ's head is bowed against John's chest.  
What lay ahead became apparent to him while the wavy blue  
    signification  
of river passed over their rubber legs.  
Or is it the inexorable march of time?

Are the rivers in your poems like the course of archetypal romance?  
Didn't Emily have Heathcliff's oriental love  
tear like a brutal river through Catherine?

My own love has been called distant, unsustaining.

Are the rivers in your poems props for insight or elevated discourse?

Do you see rivers and soften with sentiment—like Narcissus!  
bending, his knees sliding loose from that grass ledge under the weight  
of his head and hands?  
Or is it a gnosis of stone, waves, roots, air,  
the elements pouring through you and your interpretative mind—  
like a water wheel!

Though most such wheels are wooden.

I think now that life is too short for the contemplation of unrealities.  
    And I  
too struggle with rationalism.

Our selves are tied like gargantuan Gulliver by the rough logic of causes.

Do your rivers exist before and after the duration of your poems?  
Do they pass through light, shade, the bathers  
and ascetics who have cares similar to these?

Or is it nude, without this value,  
flowing like a blue division among your imagery.

Often I love your poems, and want them to be real,  
even how Hamlet is real,  
conscious, his brain a thrashing fish.

When you write of rivers, know that I am here, reading,  
that I am quietly asking what and where  
and curious about its colour and feel and temperature.

I have spent hours this week sitting on steps and sands and grasses  
beside this river and what I have learned in a speaking sense is negligible  
though I feel the significant beast before me.

Sitting at this river, my thought goes to people I once knew, days, nights,  
stories I like telling and they are drops in this river. Flowing like a block  
past this existence of mine.

Then I am the river, and the stones and twists  
are those I have loved, decisions I have made.

These categorical things are useless. Nothing is.

I wonder sometimes about the worth of metaphor. Why not  
forget about it and speak of the thing itself and stand like a surgeon in  
a room  
above this behemoth patient. No, not like that...

What would we gain by this sensible simplicity?  
For me, the world. This existence.  
All that we come to love and lose and search after,  
desperately sometimes, without grace, standing raw,  
as I did nights ago during a goodbye.

I confess, I don't understand how  
the subject can adequately love the other with tranquility.

Upland crops reduce this river. And one day  
an earthquake will shift it  
or the glacier above it will be finished  
and this slim candle, I,  
will be blown out.

And what then? A city suburb? A field of  
oil seeds or sugarcane?

Like rivers, our lives delta  
into responsibilities, family  
our growing area of care.

I have loved this river. And am following it upstream  
as though into its past  
like up and into a night of talking.

I have loved this river, even now, in late March, when it is half its full  
width  
so there is a sandbank where boats congregate at a couple of lean-tos,  
and beyond that,  
trees, jungle, villages,  
water buffalo that  
cross the mound where the river will be in months  
when it is swollen after summer rain  
and drop in to bathe and cool and float.

Is this river, with its ancient banks,  
more than one such as me? Or you?

Are the rivers in your poems inviolable, melodious, flowing to the ocean  
from mountain country?

Do they carry away fear? Are they swift, perfect, holy,  
sheltered by the moon, already possessed by gods,  
full of merry fish—are they embodied by swans, eternal, resembling  
the autumn moon, having the appearance of the sacred syllable,

peerless, a blue staircase to heaven, embodied in the pantheon,  
a bringer of peace, a destroyer of poverty  
and a destroyer of the poison of illusion?

Do they pertain to saints, are they pleased with their fortune, a follower  
of chariots, flowing through three worlds, white  
like milk, a redeemer of condemned princes, abounding in fig trees,  
dwelling in the matted hair of one god and plunging through the foot of  
another,



a reliever of fear, rhapsodic, imperishable, colourless, eternally pure,  
unmanifest,  
eminent, possessing beautiful limbs, boasting a dazzling white garment  
and leaping over mountains for pure sport?

Are they, with their three sources, triple-braided,  
a protector of the sick and the suffering, an emancipator,  
full, ancient, auspicious, bestower of merit, having a pure body?

Do they vanquish sin, embody the supreme spirit,  
are they worshipped by those we most esteem, a purifier,  
muttering, whispering past the shores, moving, alive, the substratum  
of what lives and moves, daughter, mother, wife, a twin sister plant,  
simply  
water, roaming around Rose-apple-tree Island, delightful, unfurling  
from the lotus, a liberator of the sons, a light against the darkness of  
ignorance?

With lotuses and marigolds flowing past me on their lit leaf boats,  
I stand here beside the Ganges a non-believer,  
wanting to wash myself nonetheless. I love  
to a degree that embarrasses me and wish  
I could be perfect for them  
but I cannot.

In the grip of my love, I fear I shake the leaves from their branches.

## VISIONS OF NINE PIETÀS

1.

Two smooth mounds of marble that nearly touch. Large, graceful, and abstracted shapes. Ideal, cool, conveying intensity and proximity despite their gap, and immutability and serenity in their poise.

2.

Two standard fluorescent tube lights. Christ is pink. Mary is a breathy blue.

3.

Sheet metal in an enclosed space that is shining and spotlighted with so much wattage that looking at it is unbearable and one must squint and turn away.

4.

Flaking coal or shale.

5.

The biggest living fruit tree available. Spread across the arms of the lowest branches, a disconsolate and somewhat deflated rubber fish.

6.

Planks of wood balanced precariously. The stigmata are holes. It can collapse once a day—clattering over the floor—and be rebuilt each morning.

7.

A fountain. Mary is a wide curl of wave. Christ is a jet of corroborating water.

8.

Two empty and intersecting clues on a huge crossword. Black and white. Numbers in the corners.

9.

A huge pool with a diving board. Many merry fish inside. So many lights and shards of glass on the pool floor and suspended within the water that the fish swim with peril and ecstasy.

## NEVA

You would take me to see the griffins  
guarding the bridge's four corners  
then point me north

to the Neva's embankment  
and walk halfway down the Troitsky Bridge  
and see palace after palace. With your  
thoughts somersaulting, you would hold my elbow or lean  
your head on my shoulder.

On our second day, euphoric and doused in what we have,  
we'd follow canals and relate them  
to stories we've heard. We would be

inseparable. Volleying children's names  
and sure of god and how  
when we die the grass would rainbow  
from my grave to yours

and we'd leap into the blue arms of heaven  
because we were filled with the goodness of love. At lunch,  
leaning across the table, halved by jet lag,  
we'd be surprised by the waitress and the order of the dishes

and we  
wouldn't notice much else.

At two, I'd  
stand outside a store and leave you  
with all the possible gifts.

Someone offers me a cigarette  
and the man in the shop  
asks if he can show you how low  
a locket should hang. And we would meet

and walk  
this city.

By four, you would not love me and we'd agree to meet  
for dinner. And before parting, you would look at me  
with the plainest emotion. You don't think

you will ever be completely loving. You will follow  
the Fontanka past the coloured buildings  
and sit in the heavy park shade

with the wind and the green benches where,  
years ago, aristocrats smiled and paraded in their large clothes,  
strategizing marriages, confidences, poisoning reputations,  
and admonishing the Tartars who lived wildly over the hill.