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The River

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"I do not know much about gods;
But I think that the river is a strong brown god-sullen,
Untamed and intractable ..."
T.S. Elliot, *Four Quartets*.

Dark clouds, dark sky. I have avoided thoughts about the clouds since coming back, but today, watching the black cumulus gather above the mountain; it presses on me. That is the feeling, pressure, as though the weight of the cloud is forcing recall from the ten thousand tributaries of the unconscious, pushing it upward, giving it a form and making it into a memory.

A young boy or man, one cannot say from this distance, makes his way downriver, across the broad expanse of shallows known as the three lagunas, in a dugout canoe. He sits just behind center, legs loosely crossed so he can unfold them quickly should the river try to wet him. He sees the sky blackening over Mt. Turu-ba-ri. It is early for rain although a storm from the Atlantic has settled itself over the eastern shore and is pumping water into the Central Valley and the next canton east. Today, the water was high enough to make for easy transit across the lagunas and he wants to enjoy it before the dry season reasserts itself. The river's home is the eastern canton. From there it surges from the ground as the Quebrada Maquina, twenty kilometers northeast and is joined by dozens of smaller creeks and hundreds of springs as it follows the valley slope to the Tárcoles River and on to the Pacific.

He found the log boat years before at age ten. It stood against a tree, prow wedged securely into the fork, the lower end resting on a flat rock but still pocked with rot from the surrounding mulchy soil of leaves and worms. It had been burned and hollowed from the trunk of a bitter cedar, that wasn't a cedar at all. But the bugs did not like it so there it stood for who knows how many years. The boy had dragged it, a little each day, hoping to surprise his father, but his father had found him out and the two of them lifted it to their shoulders. The Indigenas

made it, his father said, but they had not been around here since he had married the boy's mother. The boy used it with a single bamboo pole, hollow ends stuffed with rocks for a little weight and tied off with a flap of raw cowhide. One pole for each dry season and he had been through four.

He knew the rocks in this river. The stream comprised the better part of his mental map of the world. It extended from the south, the rock escarpments of the Potencianas to a few hundred meters north of the river. By the time his children were his age, they would surrender the outside, all of nature except their pets, in favor of an electronic world of relentless texting. But this was his youth and the river was the part he chose when those things that had to be done were. That was how he was on it today, on the wide and slow moving lagunas with their wide bars of river rock and sand. His parents had taken the younger ones to the dentist in the nearest city, and to visit with a colleague in that town.

The boy and his older sister remained on the farm. He had secured the canoe with a long rope from a tree on the shore, and it beckoned to him from the wide sand and rock bar that formed the beach of the river. He hung the coiled rope from the stunted branch of the tree that served as his bollard. The shallow little craft would surf the thin water rapids that connected the three flat sections in the dry season, but his one attempt in the rainy season had resulted in near disaster and he had found the canoe near the confluence with the Tárcoles after a week of searching.

This boy-man had been born at home a month early, in 1956, delivered on a weekend by his father who, out of fear for his wife's life, had done so by an emergency caesarian. He was a veterinarian so his surgery was sterile, and considering his lack of training, one could say skillful. It appeared to be the safest option given what he had been told by a physician after his second child was stillborn and his wife endangered. The trauma of the second and third births ended any further efforts to extend the family and the boy had only his sister, older by four years, for a true sibling. But like the stray and wounded animals that found their way to the veterinarian's farm, stray and wounded children washed up at their door so that the boy now had three younger siblings, all of whom were cousins of some distant degree. His parents loved these children like their own but it was his older sister who assumed, of her own volition, the responsibility for training the younger ones to be members of the family.

Her name was Gabriela and she would leave in three months for Heredia to the university followed by veterinary school. The boy had already inherited the big black mare that she rode to high school in San Pablo. The years between them were enough that she was not a reliable playmate except when her own unfinished childhood bubbled through her sense of responsibility. The happiest moments of his youth were when her loving authority dissolved into a playful equality. She watched out for him, treated his hurts as though she were already a doctor, and comforted him in the times that his little boy behavior required timeout from his parents. When he was 11 he was careless with the latch on the bathroom door and she walked in while he was massaging his new adolescent toy. In an almost incomprehensible measure of sisterly compassion and wisdom,

she chose not to see. Weeks later, when she began to tease him with, "chico malo," (bad boy), it felt less of a reminder of the incident than it did of his emerging masculinity and his now proper sense of who he was. She loved him and he knew it.

It was that same year that Marco came to speak to their father. Marco was older than Gabriela by two years and had helped his father with the farm from time to time. Marco played the guitar, like a real musician, the boy thought, and could sing "ranchera," like the Mexican singers his parents listened too. After the talk, Marco began to come several times a week and the boy realized that his sister had a boyfriend. If it had been anyone other than Marco the boy might have been jealous but Marco was fun, for all of them, and he often brought the boy a sweet orange or mango. When he was 13, a few days before his birth day, Gabriela told him to go down to the river and remind her parents she that had a test the next day and needed relief from their brothers and sister in order to study.

He could see them sitting on the old almendro log beneath the riverside higuerón. At least once a year his father would say that he was going to "cut that magnificent log into boards and make a chest one day," but it had sat there for as long as the boy could remember. The big tree cast a wide shadow and the couple shared the shade with his father's cows and the mare. The heat sucked energy from the boy and his progress was diffident, listless, down the shallow slope. He stopped a few meters away when he saw his mother's arm flail the air. "Him," she said loud enough for the boy to hear and he stopped. At the end of her arm was the paper fan with the picture of Jesus on one side and the beatitudes in caligraphy on the other. It returned to its choppy waving, low on her bosom. He could not hear his father at all but, "her," rang out from his mother and for some reason, he knew they were talking about Marco and his sister. The thought brought him alert, and then just as quickly filled him with a sadness that would require many years to understand. His mother's hands were animated the way they got when she was worried. He called out a warning and they both turned abruptly to face him over their shoulders. His father held up a hand as though to say, "wait there," and they finished whatever they were saying. His father waved the boy closer and he delivered his message. His mother had been crying.

The family lived near the village of Lagunas on a farm that sloped down to the Turubares River. Across from the farm, lay the bleached trunk of an higuerón tree its trunk wedged under a boulder and its roots exposed upstream to the river. It was just last year that the boy had scrawled a girl's name on that rock on the side away from his house with a thick chalk, thinking perhaps that it might last forever, or at least a long time.

Lagunas was his mother's home. She had met his father at the university while studying to be the teacher she now was. His father, from the high elevations at the far end of the Central Valley, loved the hotness of Lagunas. He thought that being the only veterinarian in the area was propitious, even though his practice was limited to large animals and the occasional snake-bit hunting dog, and his professional fees were as often as not, paid in kind. But as families go, in any part of the world, this one wanted for little.

The sun broadcasts from the west with an unrelenting brilliance. It provides a shocking contrast when the boy checks behind; a black and towering cloud sitting over the east end of the valley. It is raining hard in the East. The boy hesitates, allowing the canoe to drift, then reluctantly begins poling to turn the craft and make his way upstream to the first laguna. When the canoe reenters the upstream lagoon, he can just make out the large tree trunk across from the beach where he ties off the canoe. The boy had climbed on that trunk since the first time he had crossed the river with his parents. He frequently climbed the matrix of bleached roots which reminded him of fishing nets, although he noticed that there were fewer of them with each of his passing birthdays. The river has risen more and he keeps the craft to the sides where the current is slower. His sister waves to him from near the tree where he ties the canoe. She holds the line and runs it through her hands as she coils it into a throwable loop. Ten meters more and he would move back and rise to his knees to bring the prow up and drive the pole hard to beach the canoe. He looks at his sister and she waves again. She looks upstream, then back at him. Her right arm shoots straight out, sideways, "Joaquín," she yells.

He looks to his left and sees the wave enter the laguna two hundred meters upstream, a low wall of water about three feet high. The boat is sitting sideways to the current and in a frightened confusion he begins to pole the canoe to align it with the approaching wave, but headed downstream, not up. He can no longer see the wave but he hears it bearing down on him. Above the low roar he hears Gabriela; "Joaquín," she screams again, and then again. His alignment is not perfect. The wave has spread out as the water expands into the laguna but there is enough to catch the little craft at an angle, twisting it and flipping the aft end up and the boy into the water. Joaquin cannot swim but the wave washes him into the root mass of the tree as it floods the rock bar. He catches the roots and then works his way to the side, and climbs up, straddling the trunk as though it were the mare. He clutches the roots with both hands, gasping until he hears his sister's yell, "Joaquin—are you Okay?" He looks up and waves one arm heartily. It morphs into a clenched fist and his face into an exuberant grin. She waves back and then laughs, head back and hands on hips.

Gabriela's solution is to use the rope, already secured at the other end, as a support to wade the now waist deep water to get to Joaquín. Then together they would make their way back to beachside. It took him a moment to realize what she is doing. "Wait there," he yells, "I'll come to you." But she has already decided. She works her way across, paying out the rope as she goes. It will clearly not reach the opposite side but it will get her to the point where her paddling hands would help get to the tree. How they will get back without it was a question she has not yet considered.

The boy hears it first. He stares, eyes bound to the upstream bend as the choking sound of the twenty foot wall of water hunts the wide open laguna. With it comes the straight-on sound of the wave, carrying whole trees and hundreds of boulders gouged from the sides of the river, out of sight and grinding the river bottom into fine paste. The river disgorges its entire meal

of thunderstorm into the flat. Time comes close to stopping as people have reported in such circumstances. The boy turns to his sister, five meters to go; she hears but she does not look. Her eyes lock his and hold him like a beam, guiding her, pulling her the last few meters. “Joaquin, stay there,” he hears it as though from the end of a very long tunnel. Their eyes hold as the wave hits. He thinks she may have called his name once more before the water and sand fill her mouth and drag her under.

The boy has pushed his arms through the mesh of roots, his elbows twisted into the tough matrix of dried sticks. The initial shock twists the tree trunk and moves it sideways but it holds. Sometime during the minute or so that he is submerged, a large rock, suspended in the wave, smashes his left hand breaking the fourth and fifth fingers. Rock and debris pummel his head and face. As the tree quakes under the assault, he stops struggling and whoever, or whatever handles these matters, assumes control. They find him two hours later, pasted to the tree trunk and partly conscious. The boulder is gone.

Neighbors working with his father are assembling a rope tow using oil lanterns and a single flashlight to see in the dark. The boy is naked except for his shirt which hangs from one arm and is twisted into a thin rope. It is wedged into the mesh of roots and may have helped him to stay aboard the trunk. Someone throws an oversized shirt over him and his father’s trembling arm guides him to his mother who stands with the women near his tie down tree. His right hand holds the left arm well in front so that nothing touches his fingers. His mother, dry-eyed, watches him approach. She holds the frayed tie down rope and works it through her fingers rubbing each of the hemp braids, “Ave Maria, full of grace,” her lips moving without pause. When he is in front of her, she stops her prayers and extends her arm, her fingers feather his cut and swollen face, her stare penetrates his eyes to the back of his brain, “Thanks be to God, Joaquín,” she says. “Where is your sister?”

All that happened forty years ago this week. My sister’s body was never found. After the flood my family mourned quietly and deeply for well over a year. My father was able to splint and save the ring finger but the little one was crushed beyond repair and taken off at the first joint. It remains the most visible of all my scars. During that year I realized that if there was going to be another veterinarian, it would have to be me. To everyone’s surprise I became a serious student, eventually graduating from veterinary school in Heredia. I went to México for more training and then joined the faculty here. I stayed in the Central Valley and never went on the river again. My mother died of colon cancer 20 years later and my father just last year. He practiced until well into his nineties and left the farm in parcels to the remaining children. I got the house and retired here.

I have heard it said that one cannot step into the same river twice. The tree is gone of course, and the boulder. The river gives life and it takes life. Perhaps it is life. As I sit here today, I remember overhearing a classmate in high school tell someone that my sister was never found because she had been washed into the Tárcoles and eaten by the crocodiles. That remark might have made me angry,

or at least sad, but it did not. I had already decided that she had become the water, become the sand and the silt. The river was her tomb and her spirit became part of it. I still think so.