

Six Rivers

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Contents

The Perfume River

- Mom's Cocks / 13
Inheritance / 14
Ethnography / 15
The Apprentice Pearl Divers / 16
Companion / 17
Triolet (Saigon, 1980) / 18

The Mississippi River

- The Shortest Memoir / 21
Early Days / 22
Trick / 23
Piano Teacher / 24
Tire Swing / 25
A Correspondence / 26

The Charles River

- Remonstrance / 29
The Harvard Square Street Musicians / 30
Troubadour's Song / 31
Salisbury / 32
Lobster / 33
Haibun / 34
Returning to Boston / 35

The Hudson River

- Shades of the Lotus-Eaters / 39
Three Short Poems on a Common Theme / 40
The Borgias / 41
The Cannibals Will Inherit the Earth / 42
Venetian Blinds / 43
Botanical Garden / 44
Art Lessons / 46
Confessions / 48
Tanka (Upper West Side) / 49

The Aorta

- Marsyas / 53
Caesarean Section / 54
Elegy / 55
Charcoal Drawing of Dr. Claribel Cone / 56
The Pickled Womb / 58
Tanka (Epitaph for a Young Woman) / 59

The River Styx

- Ada Lovelace / 62
Caro / 66
Sappho / 68
Bad Blood / 69
Lullaby / 70
The Beekeeper's Mask / 71
Villanelle for Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) / 72
Hymn to Aphrodite / 73
Vespers / 74
The Day Before All the Names Changed / 75

MOM'S COCKS

Mom grew up beside the Perfume River in Vietnam,
in a brick house overrun by chickens.
Those horny-footed fowl were always
rubbing their feather-padded genitals
against sofa legs and children's shoes
as if they were fit to burst. Mom laughs

as she tells me how they ground
their pelvises against her leather sandal,
stuporous with misdirected lust—
How strange that she
is talking to me about sex
in this casual way. She's returning to her roots

as a child who lived among
unmannered beasts. And I, through hearing her words,
am returning there with her: I
am the aggressive rooster; I'm the hens
cowering behind the outhouse; I'm the much-abused,
much-abraded, Size Four shoe.

THE APPRENTICE PEARL-DIVERS

Bright as your eyes are, they are less bright
than the eyes of the apprentice who misguessed
how long a lanky boy with a narrow chest
can hold his breath on a pearl dive. Hot nights,
his ghost still slinks among the village bunks,
beds of the boys who were his friends; lifting the cloths
that overlie their naked flanks,
he spans them, teasingly scolding them for sloth.

At breakfast the next day, they're too afraid
to speak of what they saw: a boy, long-dead,
whose ardent eyes seared holes in their chaste sleep.
Uneasily they stand and cross themselves,
troop to church in trembling groups of ten or twelve,
and, when the priest expounds on angels, weep.

THE SHORTEST MEMOIR

Back when my breasts and two-piece bathing suit were new,
I'd take walks on the shore where the rabbit traps sprung.
And the breeze would lick my ribs with its raw wet tongue
like a hungry Southern boy at a barbecue.