

The Rise

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WE PUT THE canoe in about six miles up the Kentucky River from my house. There, at the mouth of Drennon Creek, is a little colony of summer camps. We knew we could get down to the water there with some ease. And it proved easier than we expected. The river was up maybe twenty feet, and we found a path slating down the grassy slope in front of one of the cabins. It went right into the water, as perfect for launching the canoe and getting in as if it had been worn there by canoeists.

To me that, more than anything else, is the excitement of a rise: the unexpectedness, always, of the change it makes. What was difficult becomes easy. What was easy becomes difficult. By water, what was distant becomes near. By land, what was near becomes distant. At the water line, when a rise is on, the world is changing. There is an irresistible sense of adventure in the difference. Once the river is out of its banks, a vertical few inches of rise may widen the surface by many feet over the bottomland. A sizable lagoon will appear in the middle of a cornfield. A drain in a pasture will become a canal. Stands of beech and oak will take on the look of a cypress swamp. There is something Venetian about it. There is a strange excitement in going in a boat where one would ordinarily go on foot—or where, ordinarily, birds would be flying. And so the first excitement of our trip was that little path; where it might go in a time of low water was unimaginable. Now it went down to the river.

Because of the offset in the shore at the creek mouth, there was a large eddy turning in the river where we put in, and we began our drift downstream by drifting upstream. We went up inside the row of shore trees, whose tops now waved in the current, until we found an opening among the branches, and then turned out along the channel. The current took us. We were still settling ourselves as if in preparation, but our starting place was already diminishing behind us.

There is something ominously like life in that. One would always like to settle oneself, get braced, say “Now I am going

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to begin”—and then begin. But as the necessary quiet seems about to descend, a hand is felt at one’s back, shoving. And that is the way with the river when a current is running: once the connection with the shore is broken, the journey has begun.

We were, of course, already at work with the paddles. But we were ahead of ourselves. I think that no matter how deliberately one moved from the shore into the sudden fluid violence of a river on the rise, there would be bound to be several uneasy minutes of transition. It is another world, which means that one’s senses and reflexes must begin to live another kind of life. Sounds and movements that from the standpoint of the shore might have come to seem even familiar now make a new urgent demand on the attention. There is everything to get used to, from a wholly new perspective. And from the outset one has the currents to deal with.

It is easy to think, before one has ever tried it, that nothing could be easier than to drift down the river in a canoe on a strong current. That is because when one thinks of a river one is apt to think of *one* thing—a great singular flowing that one puts one’s boat into and lets go. But it is not like that at all, not after the water is up and the current swift. It is not one current, but a braiding together of several, some going at different speeds, some even in different directions. Of course, one *could* just let go, let the boat be taken into the continuous mat of drift—leaves, logs, whole trees, cornstalks, cans, bottles, and such—in the channel, and turn and twist in the eddies there. But one does not have to do that long in order to sense the helplessness of a light canoe when it is sideways to the current. It is out of control then, and endangered. Stuck in the mat of drift, it can’t be maneuvered. It would turn over easily; one senses that by a sort of ache in the nerves, the way bad footing is sensed. And so we stayed busy, keeping the canoe between the line of half-submerged shore trees and the line of drift that marked the channel. We weren’t trying to hurry—the currents were carrying us as fast as we wanted to go—but it took considerable labor just to keep straight. It was like riding a spirited horse not fully bridle-wise: We kept our direction *by intention*; there could be no dependence on habit or inertia; when our minds wandered the river took over and turned us according to inclinations of its own. It bore us like a consciousness, acutely wakeful, filling perfectly the lapses in our own.

But we did grow used to it, and accepted our being on it as one of the probabilities, and began to take the mechanics of it for granted. The necessary sixth sense had come to us, and we began to notice more than we had to.

There is an exhilaration in being *accustomed* to a boat on dangerous water. It is as though into one's consciousness of the dark violence of the depths at one's feet there rises the idea of the boat, the buoyancy of it. It is always with a sort of triumph that the boat is realized—that it goes *on top of the water*, between breathing and drowning. It is an ancient-feeling triumph; it must have been one of the first ecstasies. The analogy of riding a spirited horse is fairly satisfactory; it is mastery over something resistant—a buoyancy that is not natural and inert like that of a log, but desired and vital and to one's credit. Once the boat has fully entered the consciousness it becomes an intimate extension of the self; one feels as competently amphibious as a duck, whose feet are paddles. And once we felt accustomed and secure in the boat, the day and the river began to come clear to us.

It was a gray, cold Sunday in the middle of December. In the woods on the north slopes above us we could see the black trunks and branches just faintly traced with snow, which gave them a silvery, delicate look—the look of impossibly fine handwork that nature sometimes has. And they looked cold. The wind was coming straight up the river into our faces. But we were dressed warmly, and the wind didn't matter much, at least not yet. The force that mattered, that surrounded us, and inundated us with its sounds, and pulled at or shook or carried everything around us, was the river.

To one standing on the bank, floodwater will seem to be flowing at a terrific rate. People who are not used to it will commonly believe it is going three or four times as fast as it really is. It is so all of a piece, and so continuous. To one drifting along in a boat this exaggerated impression of speed does not occur; one is going the same speed as the river then and is not fooled. In the Kentucky when the water is high a current of four or five miles an hour is about usual, I would say, and there are times in a canoe that make that seem plenty fast.

What the canoeist gets, instead of an impression of the river's speed, is an impression of its power. Or, more exactly, an impression of the *voluminousness* of its power. The sense of the

volume alone has come to me when, swimming in the summertime, I have submerged mouth and nose so that the plane of the water spread away from the lower eyelid; the awareness of its bigness that comes then is almost intolerable; one feels how falsely assuring it is to look down on the river, as we usually do. The sense of the power of it came to me one day in my boyhood when I attempted to swim ashore in a swift current, pulling an overturned rowboat. To check the downstream course of the boat I tried grabbing hold of the partly submerged willows along the shore with my free hand, and was repeatedly pulled under as the willows bent, and then torn loose. My arms stretched between the boat and the willow branch might have been sewing threads for all the holding they could do against that current. It was the first time I realized that there could be circumstances in which my life would count for nothing, absolutely nothing—and I have never needed to learn that again.

Sitting in a canoe, riding the back of the flooding river as it flows down into a bend, and turns, the currents racing and crashing among the trees along the outside shore, and flows on, one senses the volume and the power all together. The sophistications of our age do not mitigate the impression. To some degree it remains unimaginable, as is suggested by the memory's recurrent failure to hold on to it. It can never be remembered as wild as it is, and so each new experience of it bears some of the shock of surprise. It would take the mind of a god to watch it as it changes and not be surprised.

These long views that one gets coming down it show it to move majestically. It is stately. It has something of the stylized grandeur and awesomeness of royalty in a Sophoclean tragedy. But as one watches, there emanates from it, too, an insinuation of darkness, implacability, horror. And the nearer look tends to confirm this. Contained and borne in the singular large movement are hundreds of smaller ones: eddies and whirlpools, turnings this way and that, cross-currents rushing out from the shores into the channel. One must simplify it in order to speak of it. One probably simplifies it in some way in order to look at it.

There is something deeply horrifying about it, roused. Not, I think, because it is inhuman, alien to us; some of us at least must feel a kinship with it, or we would not loiter around it for

pleasure. The horror must come from our sense that, so long as it remains what it is, it is not subject. To say that it is indifferent would be wrong. That would imply a malevolence, as if it could be aware of us if only it wanted to. It is more remote from our concerns than indifference. It is serenely and silently not subject—to us or to anything else except the other natural forces that are also beyond our control. And it is apt to stand for and represent to us all in nature and in the universe that is not subject. That is its horror. We can make use of it. We can ride on its back in boats. But it won't stop to let us get on and off. It is not a passenger train. And if we make a mistake, or risk ourselves too far to it, why then it will suffer a little wrinkle on its surface, and go on as before.

That horror is never fully revealed, but only sensed piecemeal in events, all different, all shaking, yet all together falling short of the full revelation. The next will be as unexpected as the last.

A man I knew in my boyhood capsized his motorboat several miles upriver from here. It was winter. The river was high and swift. It was already nightfall. The river carried him a long way before he drowned. Farmers sitting in their houses in the bottoms heard his cries passing down in the darkness, and failed to know what to make of them. It is hard to imagine what they could have done if they had known.

I can't believe that anyone who has heard that story will ever forget it. Over the years it has been as immediate to me as if I had seen it all—almost as if I had *known* it all: the capsized man aching and then numb in the cold water, clinging to some drift log in the channel, and calling, seeing the house lights appear far off across the bottoms and dwindle behind him, the awful power of the flood and his hopelessness in it finally dawning on him—it is amazingly real; it is happening to him. And the families in their lighted warm kitchens, eating supper maybe, when the tiny desperate outcry comes to them out of the darkness, and they look up at the window, and then at each other.

“Shh! Listen! What was that?”

“By God, it sounded like somebody hollering out there on the river.”

“But it *can't* be.”

But it makes them uneasy. Whether or not there *is* somebody

out there, the possibility that there *may* be reminds them of their lot; they never know what may be going by them in the darkness. And they think of the river, so dark and cold.

The history of these marginal places is in part the history of drownings—of fishermen, swimmers, men fallen from boats. And there is the talk, the memory, the inescapable *feeling* of dragging for the bodies—that terrible fishing for dead men lost deep in the currents, carried downstream sometimes for miles.

Common to river mentality, too, are the imaginings: step-offs, undertows, divers tangled in sunken treetops, fishermen hooked on their own lines.

And yet it fascinates. Sometimes it draws the most fearful to it. Men must test themselves against it. Its mystery must be forever tampered with. There is a story told here of a strong big boy who tried unsuccessfully to cross the river by walking on the bottom, carrying an iron kettle over his head for a diving bell. And another story tells of a young man who, instead of walking under it, thought he would walk *on* it, with the help of a gallon jug tied to each foot. The miracle failing, of course, the jugs held his feet up, and his head under, until somebody obliged him by pulling him out. His pride, like Icarus', was transformed neatly into his fall—the work of a river god surely, *hybris* being as dangerous in Henry County as anywhere else.

To sense fully the power and the mystery of it, the eye must be close to it, near to level with the surface. I think that is the revelation of George Caleb Bingham's painting of trappers on the Missouri. The painter's eye, there, is very near the water, and so he sees the river as the trappers see it from their dugout—all the space coming down to that vast level. One feels the force, the aliveness, of the water under the boat, close under the feet of the men. And there they are, isolated in the midst of it, with their box of cargo and their pet fox—men and boat and box and animal all so strangely and poignantly coherent on the wild plain of the water, a sort of island.

But impressive as the sights may be, the river's wildness is most awesomely announced to the ear. Along the channel, the area of the most concentrated and the freest energy, there is silence. It is at the shore line, where obstructions are, that the currents find their voices. The water divides around the trunks of the trees, and sucks and slurs as it closes together again.

Trunks and branches are ridden down to the surface, or suddenly caught by the rising water, and the current pours over them in a waterfall. And the weaker trees throb and vibrate in the flow, their naked branches clashing and rattling. It is a storm of sound, changing as the shores change, increasing and diminishing, but never ceasing. And between these two storm lines of commotion there is that silence of the middle, as though the quiet of the deep flowing rises into the air. Once it is recognized, listened to, that silence has the force of a voice.

After we had come down a mile or two we passed the house of a fisherman. His children were standing on top of the bank, high at that place, waiting for him to come in off the river. And on down we met the fisherman himself, working his way home among the nets he had placed in the quieter water inside the rows of shore trees. We spoke and passed, and were soon out of sight of each other. But seeing him there changed the aspect of the river for us, as meeting an Arab on a camel might change the aspect of the desert. Problematic and strange as it seemed to us, here was a man who made a daily thing of it, and went to it as another man would go to an office. That race of violent water, which would hang flowing among the treetops only three or four days, had become familiar country to him, and he sunk his nets in it with more assurance than men sink wells in the earth. And so the flood bore a pattern of his making, and he went his set way on it.

And he was not the only creature who had made an unexpected familiarity with the risen water. Where the drift had matted in the shore eddies, or caught against trees in the current, the cardinals and chickadees and titmice foraged as confidently as on dry land. The rise was an opportunity for them, turning up edibles they would have found with more difficulty otherwise. The cardinals were more irresistibly brilliant than ever, kindling in the black-wet drift in the cold wind. The sight of them warmed us.

The Kentucky is a river of steep high banks, nearly everywhere thickly grown with willows and water maples and elms and sycamores. Boating on it in the summer, one is enclosed in a river-world, moving as though deep inside the country. One sees only the river, the high walls of foliage along the banks, the hilltops that rise over the trees first on one side and then

the other. And that is one of the delights of this river. But one of the delights of being out on a winter rise is in seeing the country, and in seeing it from a vantage point that one does not usually see it from. The rise, that Sunday, had lifted us to the bank tops and higher, and through the naked trees we could look out across the bottoms. It was maybe like boating on a canal in Holland, though we had never done that. We could see the picked cornfields, their blanched yellow seeming even on that cloudy day to give off a light. We could see the winter grain spiking green over the summer's tobacco patches, the thickly wooded hollows and slews, the backs of houses and farm buildings usually seen only by the people who live there.

Once, before the man-made floods of modern times, and before the automobile, all the river country turned toward the river. In those days our trip would probably have had more witnesses than it did. We might have been waved to from house windows, and from barn doors. But now the country has turned toward the roads, and we had what has come to be the back view of it. We went by mostly in secret. Only one of the fine old river houses is left on this side of the river in the six miles of our trip, and it is abandoned and weathering out; the floods have been in it too many times in the last thirty-five years, and it is too hard to get back to from the road. We went by its blank windows as the last settlers going west passed the hollow eyes of the skulls of their predecessors' oxen.

The living houses are all out along the edges of the valley floor, where the roads are. And now that all the crops had been gathered out of the bottoms, men's attention had mostly turned away. The land along the river had taken on a wildness that in the summer it would not have. We saw a pair of red-tailed hawks circling low and unafraid, more surprised to see us than we were to see them.

Where the river was over the banks a stretch of comparatively quiet water lay between the trees on the bank top and the new shore line. After a while, weary of the currents, we turned into one of these. As we made our way past the treetops and approached the shore we flushed a bobwhite out of a brush pile near the water and saw it fly off downstream. It seemed strange to see only one. But we didn't have to wait long for an explanation, for presently we saw the dogs, and then the

hunters coming over the horizon with their guns. We knew where their bird had gone, but we didn't wait to tell them.

These men come out from the cities now that the hunting season is open. They walk in these foreign places, unknown to them for most of the year, looking for something to kill. They wear and carry many dollars' worth of equipment, and go to a great deal of trouble, in order to kill some small creatures that they would never trouble to know alive, and that means little to them once they have killed it. If those we saw had killed the bobwhite they would no doubt have felt all their expense and effort justified, and would have thought themselves more manly than before. It reminds one of the extraordinary trouble and expense governments go to in order to kill men—and consider it justified or not, according to the "kill ratio." The diggers among our artifacts will find us to have been honorable lovers of death, having been willing to pay exorbitantly for it. How much better, we thought, to have come upon the *life* of the bird as we did, moving peaceably among the lives of the country that showed themselves to us because we were peaceable, than to have tramped fixedly, half oblivious, for miles in order to come at its death.

We left the hunters behind and went down past a green grainfield where cattle were grazing and drinking at the water-side. They were not disturbed that the river had come up over part of their pasture, no more troubled by the height of today's shore line than they were by the height of yesterday's. To them, no matter how high it was, so long as the ground was higher it was as ordinary as a summer pond. Surely the creatures of the fifth day of Creation accepted those of the sixth with equanimity, as though they had always been there. Eternity is always present in the animal mind; only men deal in beginnings and ends. It is probably lucky for man that he was created last. He would have got too excited and upset over all the change.

Two mallards flew up ahead of us and turned downriver into the wind. They had been feeding in the flooded corn rows, reminding us what a godsend the high water must be for ducks. The valley is suddenly full of little coves and havens, so that they can scatter out and feed safer and more hidden, and more abundantly too, than they usually can, never having

to leave the river for such delicacies as the shattered corn left by the pickers. A picked cornfield under a few inches of water must be the duck Utopia—Utopia being, I assume, more often achieved by ducks than by men.

If one imagines the shore line exactly enough as the division between water and land, and imagines it rising—it comes up too slowly for the eye usually, so one *must* imagine it—there is a sort of magic about it. As it moves upward it makes a vast change, far more than the eye sees. It makes a new geography, altering the boundaries of worlds. Above it, it widens the freehold of the birds; below it, that of the fish. The land creatures are driven back and higher up. It is a line between boating and walking, gill and lung, standing still and flowing. Along it, suddenly and continuously, all that will float is picked up and carried away: leaves, logs, seeds, little straws, bits of dead grass.

And also empty cans and bottles and all sorts of buoyant trash left behind by fishermen and hunters and picnickers, or dumped over creek banks by householders who sometimes drive miles to do it. We passed behind a house built on one of the higher banks whose backyard was simply an avalanche of kitchen trash going down to the river. Those people, for all I know, may be champion homebodies, but their garbage is well-traveled, having departed for the Gulf of Mexico on every winter rise for years.

It is illuminating and suitably humbling to a man to recognize the great power of the river. But after he has recognized its power he is next called upon to recognize its limits. It can neither swallow up nor carry off all the trash that people convenience themselves by dumping into it. It can't carry off harmlessly all the sewage and pesticides and industrial contaminants that we are putting into it now, much less all that we will be capable of putting into it in a few years. We haven't accepted—we can't really believe—that the most characteristic product of our age of scientific miracles is junk, but that is so. And we still think and behave as though we face an unspoiled continent, with thousands of acres of living space for every man. We still sing "America the Beautiful" as though we had not created in it, by strenuous effort, at great expense, and with dauntless self-praise, an unprecedented ugliness.

The last couple of miles of our trip we could hear off in the

bottoms alongside us the cries of pileated woodpeckers, and we welcomed the news of them. These belong to the big trees and the big woods, and more than any other birds along this river they speak out of our past. Their voices are loud and wild, the cries building strongly and then trailing off arrhythmically and hesitantly as though reluctant to end. Though they never seemed very near, we could hear them clearly over the commotion of the water. There were probably only a pair or two of them, but their voices kept coming to us a long time, creating beyond the present wildness of the river, muddy from the ruin of mountainsides and farmlands, the intimation of another wildness that will not overflow again in *our* history.

The wind had finally made its way into our clothes, and our feet and hands and faces were beginning to stiffen a little with the cold. And so when home came back in sight we thought it wasn't too soon. We began to slant across the currents toward the shore. The river didn't stop to let us off. We ran the bow out onto the path that goes up to my house, and the current rippled on past the stern as though it were no more than the end of a stranded log. We were out of it, wobbling stiff-legged along the midrib on our way to the high ground.

With the uproar of the water still in our ears, we had as we entered the house the sense of having been utterly outside the lives we live as usual. My warm living room was a place we seemed to have been away from a long way. It needed getting used to.