

POEM

THE LAWYER SPEAKS OF RIVERS

For RFK, Jr.

BY
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I waited,
like the others,
wondering what he would say.

And then,
he spoke of rivers!
He spoke, not of the father of waters,
the great Mississippi dividing the country in two,
but of the mother of Eastern waters,
discovered by Verrazano and bearing Hudson's name.
A mistaken passage to the northwest,
connected upward to the Indian sky
by a lake called Tear of the Clouds.
And reaching inland,
fed by spillways, thundering falls,
past the Mohawk and Erie Canal,
to the Great Lakes
and seaway of Saint Lawrence,
inward to the middle of the continent.
Some small stream.
He spoke of a river,
and I, not knowing,
listened.

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He spoke of a river:
estuary, tidal, fresh, and salt,
spawning hundreds of species of fish,
a Noah's ark of the ichthyan world.
I did not know
that carp are monster children
of glittering goldfish
planted one hundred fifty years ago
by Chinese settlers.
I did not know
that striped bass in West Coast streams
descend from Hudson River ancestors
transplanted, after
gold silt stirred up by the panners
caused an indigenous disaster,
killing all the salmon.

I could only recall
from childhood's early days
news bulletins from Hyde Park,
and Rip van Winkle mixed up in it too.
And once I saw the New Jersey Palisades
from the expressway past Bear Mountain.
And many years later
I recognized the Northeast forest
in the Hudson River landscape school.

But, no, I never thought of what was in the water.

He spoke of acid rain and nitrates in the snow melt.
I did not know
the bottom of Long Island Sound looked like black mayonnaise.
He spoke of sewage spilt untreated into the watery
arteries of the Northeast.
I did not know
a Beluga whale is the most polluted mammal on earth.
He spoke of harvesting dead crabs on the ocean side of Manhattan.
And did you know
that porpoises swim to Albany,
and sea horses to Poughkeepsie?

He spoke of the river and a river-keeper.
I did not know
a man could spend his days patrolling,
testing the waters for chemical drip,
spying on tankers discharging jet fuel

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next to the water supply of New York,
watching them steal fresh water
to take to dry-docked Aruba.
He spoke of skeet shooting over the river
with lead pellets labeled toxic to hogs,
the splintered targets immersed in drinking water
as lethal as the bullets that shattered them.

We did not know those things.
And I marveled at his own replete survival.

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