

WRITING AN ELEGY FOR ELLICOTT CITY WHILE READING T.S. ELIOT

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1.

FOUR YEARS AGO, I was wading in the stretch of river just below Ellicott City with my son, playing explorer among the ruins. There was plenty to explore and all of it was wondrous to a four-year-old boy: stone foundations of swept-away railroad bridges, crumbling pump houses, abandoned barns. The washed-out road and the overgrown cemetery. But even better were the assortment of treasures the river dragged ashore— old tires and steering wheels and a rusted utility sink, rotary phone dial, limbless doll, carousel horse, electric typewriter.

What we were really after, though, was river glass, the frosted, round-edged bits of tumbled old bottles. The best was the blue river glass— we'd pace the banks looking for flecks of azure poking out of soil and silt. It would clink in my cargo pants pockets and accumulate on the car seats, until deposited into a jar on our fireplace mantel. One day, though, I looked up from our hunt and discovered, nailed high on a river birch, two wooden signs. The smaller read: *Patapsco River*. The larger, more improbably:

*I do not know much about gods, but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god
T.S. Eliot 1941*

2.

When the Ellicott Brothers bought a tract of land in 1771 in “The Hollow” on the east bank of Maryland’s Patapsco, they did so because of the promise of this *strong brown god* and its swift currents. Flour mill, saw mill, cotton mill, the *whirr* of money— soon this was one of the biggest manufacturing towns on the East Coast. Today, there is just one mill left and the old boomtown of Ellicott City is best known for its eclectic Main Street with its antique stores, bars, gift shops, and restaurants inhabiting the old funeral parlor, department store, movie theater, and mill workers’ homes.

As a town built at the bottom of a bowl, built at the juncture of three tributaries with one running right through town, Ellicott City is no stranger to flooding. The railroad bridge across the bottom of Main Street features a wooden beam with watermarks and dates:

1972, 14.5 feet

1923 and 1975, 9 feet

1952, 7 feet

And taller than the bridge itself, on the fence protecting the tracks, the most ominous: *1868, 21.5 feet.*

I was driving the three miles home from Ellicott City one Thursday evening when the local NPR station broadcast a short segment on this [Great Flood of 1868](#). Just like this summer, there were days upon days of 100-degree heat and little rain. When a violent thunderstorm hit on July 24, 1868, the Patapsco overran its banks, drowning 43 residents. It’s easy to find omens in hindsight. Still, I know I shivered in the car’s AC along with the historian’s baritone: “The river rose 25 feet. The water hit the first dams, formed a wall that rolled back on itself, sending spray 20 feet high, then broke through.”

Just two nights later, the night of Saturday, July 30th, my husband and I planned to pop down to Main Street for dinner. But we bickered, we dithered, and then, when the driving rains began, decided on takeout. Within an hour, Main Street was its own river— toppling marble furniture, whisking away cars, washing away foundations, collapsing centuries-old storefronts. If the rain had been spread out as it usually was, over hours and days, the basements would have filled, there would have been the slow, seeping flood to which the area was more accustomed. But in just 3 hours, Main Street saw [8 inches of rain](#), 120 swift-water rescues, and two fatalities. A state of emergency. A *natural* disaster.

3.

Well before this flood, the T.S. Eliot sign disappeared in bits and pieces, during various tropical storms and hurricanes, first the poetry, than the river’s name too.

I would not believe this sign ever existed if I didn't have the photos, my own Facebook post, as proof.

This line and a half is taken from the opening of "The Dry Salvages," the third poem in Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

*I do not know much about gods, but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god...*

This bit of poetry has often been used to refer to the Mississippi, an epigraph for countless books and chapters on that mighty river's power. Here's the rest of that section of the poem:

*—sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.*

Now that Eliot himself is another lost signpost, one of Modernism's toppled icons, it's easy to read these lines as evidence of Nature's fury. It's convenient to read these lines as a list of an opponent's qualities — *sullen, untamed and intractable...implacable...destroyer*. It's even easier, more convenient, to overlook what Eliot writes just a few lines later: *The river is within us*.

4.

Earlier this summer, I had observed another instance of Nature's fury on Ellicott City's Main Street. A woman was parallel-parking during rush hour on the two-lane road that cuts through town. With gas-guzzlers honking, she was pulling back out, trying to cut her wheel, bumping curb, over and over.

I was stuck in traffic going the opposite way, and on, the narrow road I was just six feet from her, encased in my own automotive bubble. At first, I thought she was just hopping up and down in her seat, dancing, perhaps, but then I saw that tears were streaming down her face, that she was screaming: *shut up! shut up! I can't fit! I can't fit!* And then her forehead split open. She did what we have all threatened to—I'll beat my head against the windshield, just watch me!

In the days since the flood, when I see the newspaper photos of cars on their sides, uprooted trees, shop owners sobbing on their knees, I see her again, the ink

blot of blood on the windshield, her contorted face, her plea: *I can't fit!*
What does it mean to say *Nature's fury*, to insist upon a force outside ourselves that makes streets into rivers and makes rivers into monsters? What fury is there, ever, other than our own?

5.

Three days after the flood, I and my son, now eight, returned to peek at one of our old wading spots. Main Street was blocked off at either end, bookended by National Guard and police, and for good reason— there were buildings still collapsing, gas leaking, sewage overflowing. River silt covered the road, launched more than twenty-feet up the riverbank.

We had seen many changes in the river in the past four years: the swimming holes etched and erased, the pebbled islands reshaped. Upstream, the changes had been building, just as they were in boomtown Ellicott City in 1868, except now, instead of mill upon mill, there are new brick townhouses, pastel-colored condos, a neighborhood of beige McMansions. *I can't fit! I can't fit!* Building, building, building while [more rain is falling](#) and more surfaces are paved, making sluices of our streets. It is the oldest story— one part of a town destroying the other, oblivious.

Bobbing in the churning water and piled up on the other bank, car upon twisted car, spray-painted Xs on their undercarriages. *The river is within us*, its rearview mirrors, dashboard components and door handles, the rubble some other four-year-old will one day call *treasures* and beg his mother to slip into her pocket. And maybe, the bottles swept right off the bar, the shattered picture frames, and the storefront windows will be tumbled into the treasure this other mother will be seeking — the lens of river glass to soften, to transmute the past.

***To donate to help the residents and merchants of Ellicott City, visit:**

<https://ecpartnership.org>

and

<http://preservationmaryland.org/help-ellicott-city-recover-destructive-flood/>

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