

- [☒](#)



- [Daily](#)
- [Current Issue](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Store](#)
- [About](#)
-

Follow

- [Archive](#)

- [Back Issues](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Poetry](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Letters & Essays](#)
- [Art & Photography](#)
- [Audio](#)
- [About](#)
- [History](#)
- [Masthead](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Submissions](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Prizes](#)
- [Media Kit](#)
- [Support *The Paris Review*](#)
- [Bookstores](#)

the PARIS REVIEW

Crossing

Mark Slouka

It was raining as they drove out of Tacoma that morning. When the first car appeared he could see it from a long way off, dragging a cloud of mist like a parachute, and when it passed he touched the wipers to clear things up and his mind flashed to a scene of a black road, still wet, running toward mountains larded with snow like fatty meat. For some reason it made him happy, and he hadn't been happy in a while. By seven the rain was over. The line of open sky in the east was razor sharp.

He looked over at the miniature jeans, the sweatshirt bunched beneath the seat belt's strap, the hiking boots dangling off the floor like weights. "You

OK?” he said. “You have to pee?” He slowed and drove the car onto the shoulder and the boy got out to pee. He looked at him standing on that rise in the brome and the bunchgrass, his little hips pushed forward. When the boy walked back to the car he swung the door open for him, then reached over and pulled the door shut and bumped out on the empty road.

Not much had changed, really. A half hour out of Hoquiam he began to see the clear-cuts through the firs: a strange, white light, as if the world dropped away fifty feet out from the pavement. He hoped the boy wouldn't notice. The two of them had been talking about what to do if you saw a mountain lion (don't run, never run), and what they'd have for lunch. Twenty minutes later they were past it, and the light behind the trees had disappeared.

He'd been at the house by dawn, as he'd promised. He sat in the driveway for a while looking at the yard, the azaleas he'd planted, the grass in the yard beaten flat by the rain. For a long time he hadn't wanted her back, hadn't wanted much of anything, really. He went inside, wiping his shoes and ducking his head like a visitor, and when the boy came running into the living room he threw him over his shoulder, careful not to hit his head on the corner of the TV, and at some point he saw her watching them, leaning against the kitchen counter in her bathrobe, and when he looked at her she shook her head and looked away and at that moment he thought, maybe—maybe he could make this right.

The forest-service road had grown over so much that only his memory of where it had been told him where to turn off. The last nine miles would take them an hour. This is it, kid, the old man would say whenever they turned off the main road, you excited? Every year. The car lurched and swayed, the grass hissing against the undercarriage. He could see him, standing in the river hacking his lungs out, laying out an eighty-foot line. “Almost there,” he said to the little boy next to him. “You excited?”

He slowed under the trees to let his eyes adjust and when he rolled down the window the air shoved in and he could hear the white noise of the river. God, how he needed this place, the nests of vines like something scratched out, the furred trunks, soft with rot. He'd been waiting for this a long time. A low vine scraped against the roof. He smiled. Go ahead and scrape, you fucker, he thought, scrape it all.

Eight years. It didn't seem that long. Where the valley widened out he could see what the winter had left behind: the gouged-out pools, the sixty-foot trunks rammed into the deadfalls, the circles of upturned roots like giant blossoms of Queen Anne's lace. A gust of warmer air shoved in: vegetation, sunlight, the slow fire of decay. Sometimes it wasn't so easy to know how to go, how to keep things alive. Sometimes the vise got so tight you could forget there was anything good left in the world. But he'd been talking about this place—the rivers, the elk, the steelhead in the pools—since the boy was old enough to understand. And now it was here. He looked at the water, rushing slowly like flowing glass over car-size boulders nudged together like eggs.

He explained it all as they lay out their things in the mossy parking place at the road's end. The trail continued across the Quinault; they'd ford the river, then walk about three miles to an old settler's barn where they could spend the night. They'd set up their tent inside anyway because the roof was pretty well gone. Of course they'd have a campfire—there was a fire ring right there—and sometimes, if you were quiet, herds of elk would graze in the meadow at dusk.

When they came out of the trees and onto the stony beach he felt a small shock, as if he were looking at a house he'd grown up in but now barely recognized. The river was bigger than he remembered it, stronger; it moved like a swiftly flowing field. He didn't remember the opposite shore being so far off. He stood there, listening to it seething in its bed, to the inane chatter of the pebbles in the shallows, the hollow *tock* of the stones knocking against each other in the deeper water. Downstream, a branch caught in a deadfall reared up like something shot, then tore loose. For a moment he considered pulling out, explaining . . . but there was nowhere else to go. And he'd promised.

“Well there she is,” he said.

They took off their packs and squatted down next to each other on the embankment. “You want to take your time, kiddo,” he said. “People in a hurry get in trouble.” The boy nodded, very serious. He'd bring their packs over and then come right back for him. It would take a little while, but he'd be able to see him the whole time. He'd wave when he got to the other side.

He took off his pants and socks and boots, stuffed the pants and socks into the top of the pack, then tied the boots back on over his bare feet. The boy's weightless blue backpack, fat with his sleeping bag and teddy bear, he strapped to the top as well, then swung the whole thing on his back. No belt. He looked at the boy. “First rule of river crossing—never buckle your waist belt. If you go down, you have to be able to get your pack off as quickly as possible, OK?” The boy nodded. “I'll be right back,” he said.

It wasn't too bad. He took it slow, carefully planting the stick downstream with his right arm, resisting the urge to look back. Ten yards out the water rose above his knees and he slowed even more, feeling for the edges of the rocks with his boots, moving from security to security. The heavier current swept the stick before it touched the bottom, making it harder to control, and he began drawing it out and stabbing it down ahead of himself and slightly upstream to make up for the drift, and then he was on the long, gravelly flat and across. He threw down the packs and looked back. The boy was just where he'd left him, sitting on the rocks, hugging his knees. He waved quickly and started back. You just had to be careful. So what do you do if you fall? he remembered asking once—how old could he have been, seventeen?—and the old man calling back over his shoulder, “Don't fuckin' fall.”

The second crossing, with the boy on his back, was actually easier. They talked the whole time, and he made his way carefully, steadily, feeling the skinny legs bouncing against his thighs, leaning into the hands buckled across his collarbone, and halfway across, with the hot smell of the pines coming from the shore and the sun strong on his face, he knew he'd made it out the other side. Where had it come from—this slide into weakness, this vision of death like a tunnel at the end of the road and no way to get off or turn around? It didn't matter. Whatever it was had passed. He and his son would be friends. Nothing mattered more.

The barn was just where he remembered it, standing against the trees like a rib cage. What could they have been thinking, building a barn, here, with

ninety inches of rain a year? Its roof was half gone and its floor rotted through but there was something about pitching a tent inside that skeleton that was pretty neat, they agreed, and snapping the compression poles together—always a good trick—he remembered the two of them working together, quietly, easily, then his father crawling into the tent to lay out the sleeping bags. Something about rooms in rooms.

They set up the rain fly just in case, then shined the flashlight at the bats clustered under the peak of the roof, making them squeak like kittens, and went outside to the fire ring. It was a beautiful evening, still and perfect, the sky above the trees deepening to the blue of a butterfly wing he'd once found by the side of a trail in Guatemala, and they took turns eating the macaroni out of the pot (he let him pour in the orange cheese powder) and afterward they fenced with the marshmallow sticks and waved the torches they made against the darkness and when the marshmallows were black and sagging, they pulled out their uncooked hearts and ate them off the wood with their lips and teeth, delicate as horses. At some point it started to rain, and standing in the double door of the barn, the boy on a pile of boards, they could see the shapes of the elk coming into the meadow and they watched, staring into the dark, until the only way you could tell the herd was still there was that every few seconds one would shiver the rain out of its hide, making a small white cloud, like breath. He could hardly make out the boy next to him: now his hand against the dark wood, now the plane of his cheek. "Dad?" he heard him say. "Do the elk have to sleep in the rain?"

"I think they're pretty well used to it," he said.

"You think they're cold?"

"Hard to tell. Wet, anyway."

He put his arm around him—that tiny shoulder, tight as a nest—but, aware of the weight, didn't let it rest completely. And they were quiet. Thank you, he thought, then mouthed the words to himself in the dark.

The rain made sleep easy. The two of them lay side by side in their softly crackling sleeping bags like pods, identical but for size. When he crawled out of the tent in the middle of the night to pee, the rain had stopped and he could see stars through the missing places in the roof. Later he thought he heard the rain again, but he'd been dreaming something about rain, and with half the boy's rib cage cupped in his palm, he slept.

In the morning the ground was soaked but he managed to get up a fire anyway. There was a heavy mist on the meadow, and it rose and drifted across the sky in long smoky sweeps. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen something so beautiful. After breakfast they left their packs in the barn and went exploring. He'd promised he'd have him back that night. They didn't have to leave till noon.

The morning went too quickly, but he didn't mind. Better not to overdo it the first time. There would be other trips. He wanted to leave things undone. They walked a mile up the trail to a tributary of the river where they found a big track pressed into the mud that looked like it might have been a cat's, and then it was time to go.

They were about a mile from the river when he realized that coming back he'd have to hold the stick in his left hand: the current would be coming from the other side now. It didn't matter; his right shoulder was a little stiffer maybe, so sitting the boy on his arm would be a little less comfortable, but that was all. It shouldn't matter much.

He had thought the river sounded louder even before they came out of the trees, and it did. He understood right away. It wasn't the rain—there hadn't been enough to make a difference. It was the afternoon melt: in the mountains, forty miles away, the snowfields were melting in the sun. They'd slow in the evening cold, and not pick up again until the following day. He knew this. He'd forgotten.

Still, it didn't amount to all that much. Looking at the river, you could hardly tell the difference. The boy had run ahead; he could see him throwing sticks into the current. He'd just have to take it slow, that's all. Anyway, it wasn't as though they could wait till the next morning; he'd promised to have him back. There was no way of letting her know. But it didn't matter. Slow down, fella, he said to himself, but the sound of his own voice made him uncomfortable, so he didn't say anything more.

He walked in over the wet stones and splashed some water on his face, then pointed out where the current ran clear and flat over fist-size rocks, thigh deep. He was thinking too much. He took off his shoes and socks and pants, retied his shoes, and slipped on the two packs, the belt dangling free.

"OK, kiddo," he said, "same thing as yesterday. You just stay put right here, and I'll wave from the other side."

The current was stronger—he could tell right away from the pull on his calves, the sound it made—not much stronger, but stronger. He worked slowly, picking his path, lifting the stick completely clear of the water and jabbing it down, leaning into the current, avoiding any rocks larger than a plate. It was a good track. With a river of any size, there was only one way—straight across, maybe slightly quartering upstream. You had to pick your path and go. You had to plan ahead, never take a step you couldn't move from.

Halfway across he stopped and rested his arm. It felt strange to be standing there, the current wrapping itself hard around his thigh. He looked at his watch. It was taking a little longer. So what? He'd crossed this thing a dozen times. More. Eight years was nothing. Same man, same river.

When he made it to the beach he dumped the packs and waved quickly and started back across. It had gone well. Well enough. His left arm was a little tired but he could rest it on the way back—the current was from the other direction now—and not having the packs made a difference. He tried not to look at the boy sitting where he'd left him on the opposite shore because there was something about the smallness of him in his blue shorts against the bank of stones he didn't like and because he wanted to keep his eyes on the water, and yet when he slipped, the toe of his right boot catching on the edge of something then sliding over rock as slick as any ice, he was looking straight down into the water. He floundered awkwardly, stumbled, thrust the stick with both hands into the current as if lunging at something under the water, and felt it catch. He hadn't seen it—whatever it was. He breathed, feeling his heart thrashing in his ribs. You never see it, he thought.

There was no point in waiting, so less than a minute after he'd slopped out onto the rocks and flexed his arms like Mr. Universe ("You ready, kiddo?"), he squatted down and the boy crawled onto his back. "You see how I almost fell back there?" he said. "You have to be careful. I got a little

sloppy.”

“I saw an eagle,” the boy said. “It was enormous, and it flew right over the river.”

“Really?” he said, already walking into the water.

The boy felt a little heavier than he had before, and thirty feet in he hoisted him up and shifted the weight. “OK?” he said. He continued on, feeling for edges, probing ahead like a snail testing the air, then stopped and readjusted him again. When he stopped the third time, he knew it was going to be a push. He should have brought the boy across first. He wished he could switch him to his left, hold the stick with his right. He had to stretch his arm for a second, he said. He dropped his arm and the boy dangled from his neck, and then he caught him up and the pressure eased from his windpipe and they continued on. He tried not to look downstream. “How you doin’ back there?” he said. He was strong. He could do this.

They didn’t go down when it happened, but they should have. How he managed to stay up in that current, already sliding four, five feet downstream, slipping on one algae-slick rock, then another, he didn’t know. How he managed not to turn upstream or down, which would have been that, he didn’t know either. All he knew was that they were still up and the boy was still on his back and he was straightening up, still facing the shore, no more than a broomstick’s length from where they’d been a moment earlier. The current was mid-thigh and strong.

He could hear himself, breathing hard. “I’m OK, kiddo. I’m OK. That wasn’t good, but we’re fine.”

They weren’t fine. Ignoring the quivering in his shoulder he tried to take stock. The rocks were bigger here. He couldn’t get back to where they’d been. He couldn’t quarter upstream and intercept the path because there was a flat pale rock the size of a small table in the way, and the water below it was too deep. “Do me a favor, kid,” he said. “See if you can feel where my eyes are. That’s it, don’t worry—I’ve got you. Now when I count to three, I’ll close my left eye and you wipe the sweat out with your thumb, OK?” He could feel the boy’s thumb slide gently over his eyelid. “Good, now do it again.”

There had to be a way—something he couldn’t see. There was nothing. A step behind him, the rocks were smaller. It didn’t matter. He couldn’t step back. Crossing a river meant moving forward, holding the weight on the back leg while the front foot felt for purchase. Turning around was impossible. At some point he’d have to take the full weight of the current with his legs perpendicular to the shore like a tennis player anticipating a serve; unbraced, he’d come off the bottom like nothing at all. A thin stream of panic started in his head, dulling the sound of water. He looked around stupidly, blinking back the sweat. The shore looked like it was behind a screen. He moved his right foot forward, felt it begin to slide, pulled back. Fuck you, he whispered. Fuck you.

They’d get out of this. They had to get out of this. My God, all his other fuckups were just preparations for this. This wasn’t possible. He could feel the current—strong, insistent, pumping against his thigh like a drunken lover. Was this how it went? One stupid move? One stupid fucking move, and your son on your back? No. He could do this. He tried to remember the strength he’d felt, that rude, beautiful strength, felt it pushing back the curtain of fear. There was nowhere to go.

He could barely bring himself to speak. He couldn’t move. The way ahead was impossible. Far below, he could hear the water sucking on the shallow cavity made by his hip. The river. It wanted to be whole, unbroken. It wanted him gone. He could see it, forming and reforming, thick-walled jade, smoothing out its sides with its thumbs like a hypnotized potter. The water blurred. He wanted to scream for help. There was no one—just the rushing plain of the river, the trees. He couldn’t move. A muscle in his shoulder was jerking like a poisoned animal. What combination of things? Everything had come together. He couldn’t move. He was barely holding on. There was no way. The river ahead was smooth, deep, gliding over brown boulders trailing beards of moss in the deep wind. He wanted to laugh. For a second, he felt the hot, shameful fire of remorse and then unending pity—for himself, for the boy on his back, for the world—and at that moment he remembered hearing about a medieval priest who, personally taking the torch from the executioner, went down the line of victims tied to their stakes and kissed each one tenderly on the cheek before lighting the tinder.

“Dad, you OK?” he heard his son saying as if from some other place. There was nowhere to go. It didn’t matter. They had to go.

And then he heard his own voice, answering. “I’m OK, buddy,” it said. “You just hang on.”

Love what you’ve read? [Subscribe to The Paris Review.](#)

YOU MIGHT ALSO ENJOY

Donald Antrim, *Elect Mr. Robinson for a Better World*

Alistair Morgan, *Icebergs*

Etgar Keret, *A Bet*