

THOMAS LARSON

# No Absence Like Water's Absence

Sometimes in winter, if we're lucky, a brawling Pacific storm swoops down on Southern California. Its sudden fury—night winds, roof leaks, street-flooding—masks its belated arrival. Where's this much moisture been? Why so long getting here?

Every winter, I worry the rains won't fall. Another year added to the droughts of the aughts, no doubt. Confirming climate change, each decade ticks into the eon, coming and here, twice at once. At least that's how it felt during a walk I took one August day up a virtually dry mountain riverbed.

I begin in Idyllwild, above Palm Springs and below the San Jacinto Mountains. From a ridge southwest of town I hike down to Strawberry Creek, fast-treading a mile's descent in ten minutes flat, down a path barely visible beneath blister-leaved poison oak, through scarlet-barked manzanita. My heart pulses in my blood-heavy hands.

When the ravine bottoms out, I find the creek near an end of itself. The water is low, barely trickling. Once (how long gone?) this creek roared in a string of seasons—fall, winter, spring. But now the absence of rushing water strikes me as if I'd come upon a home abandoned in the country, its windows broken, its front door locked. All around me is the absent water, which, of course, is nearly like its presence on the rock's surface.

I feel my way up this streambed, pass huge-hurtled

chunks of sun-warmed stone, grainy rough like castle walls. I'm drawn to an elephant-butt bulge of granite, immense, unseamed. I climb around a spa-sized hollow of gray, a skateboarder's slant of rakish boulder. This bowl is steep; I shimmy up and over and plop into another hollow.

Here the surface is pocked from torrents of water that once sprayed sand against its bulk during years when winter lodged in spring. Gouges and grooves, now smooth, were slap-dashed in by a violent snowmelt. Again, I touch the water's absence on the rock. I long for the noisy security of a mad creek, when I hear a surprise, the sound of insolent water dripping, just ahead.

I crawl over another fat-bellied boulder and there's the dribble-pond, above it a small falls, curtaining a cavernlike mouth. I bend close to inspect. As if it and I might agree to pose the question of my existence, the little leftover water seems alien, purposeless. An existential pool. Yet it's also placidly alone. I feel unwelcome, other—this is a private place. Hesitant, hoping, I hold up the falling water in my hands and peer in.

Behind is a cave, mossy damp, its smell soured nature. A breath-ball of spoiled air rolls out. On the cave's floor: a few blanched twigs, rosy-white pebbles, a platter of black water, and two skater bugs, measuring the surface's opaque gleam. Above, the cave's ceiling has gathered boulders like billiard balls, each wedged into a beamless ramada: a river-rolled roof of water-rounded rock. As in a storm drain, a few drips plunk ... drip-plunk ... drip-plunk. Drops natter on, declaring this a secret chamber, the dream cave of drought. Here boats of water float beneath an evaporated river.

I want to flag this fertility, this damp smatter, to register the claim that one capillary of water flows. But the cave restricts. Its small hidden wetness echoes, then shrugs at my desire, ghostly indifferent to me. The cave assesses me, too: *Go away, you're not ready. This is the memory of a dehydrating river.*

I stay, though, wanting a token for my discovery—a value, perhaps a sign. Instead, the falls dribbles on, insistent, timeless. I feel the cave, ignoring me, thicken further, looping back down its spiral-shelled consciousness. It says, finally you are immaterial beside a scant river that even in drought harbors its own wet desire.

I hear it say, too, that within you there is no absence

like water's absence on or under rock. In water's dream, no *you* remains, no hatchery where your minnow roams, no bog where your single cells flash and squirm in flagellum ecstasy. Nothing up this creek speaks to your species' beginning, nothing—not even the stale liquid your lips refuse. If you can't drink of death, what planetary good are you?

There, at the chasm between natural and human, I recoil, thinking utopia, the no place I might be. Aborted child of air, vain orphan of earth, despite self, we are, to water's all, distilling matter, bodies termed to ossify, sucked dry even in sealed tombs.

So just this once the hole of my fate is unveiled. Such bright-lit terror of my coming, soon my gone, is a frost I cannot bear. Not right now. Maybe later. First, I run—kicking dried-out pinecones, through oak brush, scaring sun-dappled lizards, I run, looking for a road, a vehicle upon it, a ride back, I run, looking to my scant life, how many years am I before this rivering dust of my becoming, looking to the paltry thing I'm handed, this drought, my few decades' worth, take it, *take it fool*—and I took it, running.

Journalist, critic, and memoirist, **Thomas Larson** has been a staff writer for the *San Diego Reader* for thirteen years. His latest book, *The Saddest Music Ever Written: The Story of Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings,"* is in paperback. He teaches in the low-residency MFA program in creative non-fiction at Ashland University, Ashland, Ohio.